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In the epic prequel to *.hack*, the avatar Albireo is a solo adventurer in The World— the most advanced online fantasy game ever created. When he comes across Lycoris, a strange little girl in a dungeon, Albireo wonders if she's simply nothing more than a bug in the system.

As the two journey further into The World, Albireo watches Lycoris turn all of the rules of The World upside down. Slowly, he comes to realize that she may hold a very deadly secret—a secret that could unhinge everything in cyberspace . . . and beyond!

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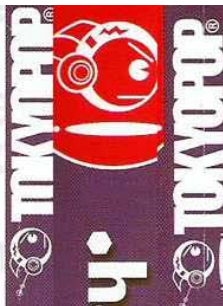—Kristin Fletcher-Spear, *VOYA*

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Story : Tatsuya Hamazaki // Illustrations : Rei Izumi

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Tatsuya Hamazaki

Tatsuya Hamazaki is the writer of several *Gundam* manga, as well as the author of many different novelizations.

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// AI buster

Story by
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Area.0 Navel of Lake

.: 1 :.

I plugged in.

I felt the hair stand up on the back of my neck as a brief surge of excitement bristled down my spine. It lasted only a millisecond as my consciousness leapt from my real body into my avatar. I scanned my surroundings. It's the first thing I do whenever I jump into The World.

Δ (Delta) Server Zone: Hidden, Forbidden, Sacred

I was in what looked like an old gothic stone church. A long service hall stretched before me, its ceiling cross vaulted. The marble floor had a greenish tint with a diamond-shaped pattern. A pendulum swung back and forth marking

off time. Looking around, I noticed three other pendulums forming a perfect square.

Tick-tock, tick-tock.

Whoever designed the area spent a lot of time programming an exceptional level of detail for this part of The World—an area of cyberspace with over fifteen million registered players speaking ten different languages. But since none of those registered users were allowed here in the Sacred Zones, why would someone spend so much time designing this level of detail?

There were a few flaws, however. There was no obvious light source, but that was the advantage of cyberspace. The rules could be bent. Of course, they could be bent to your advantage or disadvantage.

I stood before a railing that was only waist high. Beyond the railing was the church's altar. I wanted to study the altar's detail more closely, but couldn't. In reality, it would be easy to climb over the railing, but that wasn't allowed here—just one of the many cyber "rules" dictating that the programmer is God and the laws of physics are code.

The four pendulums swung in perfect unison.

Tick-tock . . .

It reminded me I didn't come here to sightsee. I had business to attend to and I was sure my soldiers, at least those who were real, were growing impatient.

I quickly moved down the service hall where I found the members of the Cobalt Knights waiting for me.

They were stationed at each of the building's four exits, creating a blockade. Each knight wore plate mail and was armed with a long, sharpened spear. It was standard material, reminiscent of medieval Europe and common to most Role-Playing Games, or RPGs.

One of the knights stepped forward. "We've been expecting you, Captain."

"Do you have the NPC?" I asked. NPC stands for Non-Player Character, in other words, the background people such as merchants, innkeepers, barmaids, etc. They are computer-controlled avatars who are necessary for the world to seem *real*. Occasionally, one formed a little too much consciousness and no longer acted within its programmed parameters. That's when I was called in. "We've sealed off all escape. She's trapped."

I moved closer to find the object of my mission. Even though I'd been briefed on the target before I arrived, I was taken aback when I saw her. Standing in the center of the room, surrounded on all sides by menacing knights more than twice her size, stood a little girl. She looked to be around twelve or thirteen and was dressed entirely in red. Even her platinum-blond hair had red streaks running through it. Her skin was pale, almost translucent, and I noticed she wasn't wearing any shoes.

"You're sure it's her?" I asked.

"Absolutely. She matches the description and she doesn't appear to be a cheat." Cheats are modified characters who break the laws of the game. An example of a cheat might be someone who always hits whatever they swing at, even when the game mechanics would dictate a miss.

"What should we do, Captain?"

She turned toward me, her eyes wide and innocent. At the same time, her expression betrayed her realization: she was caught in a web she couldn't escape.

"Are you going to delete me?" Her voice was as sweet and innocent as her face. I ignored her.

"Have you shielded the area?"

"Yes. Both gate-in and gate-out functions from the Chaos Gate are disabled," reported the knight.

"What about regular players?" I asked, checking up on whether he'd read the area specs.

"None in this area. We've confirmed that."

"Good. You've done your job well."

"Are you going to delete me?" she repeated. I turned away and addressed the knights in a loud voice.

"According to regulations, this NPC is recognized as an irregular Non-Player Character that is not in the specification of the Japanese version of The World." It was tech jargon for "prepare to attack."

With a sudden clang, the knights lowered their spears and stepped forward. They moved in perfect unison.

I switched to debug mode, which is only available to system administrators, and urged my knights forward.

"Are you going to delete me?" she asked, trying not to sob.

"Don't pretend to be human. You won't fool me with your girlish charm. You're a Vagrant AI and you'll get what you deserve."

"I'm what?"

"You're garbage! Bad code. Damaged data. The Cobalt Knights correct mistakes like you."

Her dress fluttered in slow motion, something that could only happen in movies or cyberspace.

"I'm a failure," she whispered.

"Delete her." Instantly, two knights stepped forward and launched an attack. A blinding flash of white light shot forth from their spears. When it dissipated, the girl was impaled.

Tick-tock, tick-tock.

I listened to the pendulums swing in the background. The girl's body faded and disappeared after a few seconds. One of the knights reported: "Subject 'delete' completed."

"Good." I nodded and approached the two knights who blocked the front entrance of the church. One of them was a new recruit to the Cobalt Knights. This was his first assignment.

"You did well, recruit."

"Thanks. What kind of area is this, anyway?"

"You're in the Zone: Hidden, Forbidden, Sacred."

"How come there aren't any monsters or treasure? There's hardly anything!"

"It's a Sacred Zone. It's different from the other areas of The World."

"Yeah?"

"Have you heard of *Epitaph of the Twilight*?" I asked the recruit.

"Uh, yeah, I think so. Isn't that the novel that The World is based on?"

"Yes. It used to be found on a German home page several years ago—before the *Pluto Kiss*."

"What do you mean . . . used to be?"

"It no longer exists. But the story begins with a scene set in this area, the 'Navel of Lake.' "

"Navel of Lake?"

"That's the name of this area. Didn't you do your homework?"

"Uh . . . ?"

"You were supposed to read the area specs before you logged in. You were supposed to have everything memorized. What the hell's wrong with you?"

"Oh yeah, I read it!" He wasn't convincing.

"And . . . ?"

"Well, in the old version of The World, it wasn't three words, but the name of the area done in three letters, right?"

"You're half right, but not making any sense. Next time, try paying attention to your assignment. Until then, I'll give you a short history lesson." I sighed. Recruits.

"Instead of selecting three words to enter an area like we do now, we used to select three letters to enter an area. This is back in the old version of The World as well as in the beta version, called Fragment, neither of which was ever released."

The recruit nodded.

"Now we refer to this area as a Hidden, Forbidden, and Sacred Zone. But it used to be called Navel of Lake."

The recruit shook his head slowly. He looked around the church, taking in the details as I first had. None of the background objects were recycled or repeated as is so often done to save time. Instead, every detail was carefully chosen and mapped in 3-D. I wondered how many CG artists had been hired to render the image of the church alone before the area was completed. For commercial game software this was extravagant.

"With so much complexity, this place must be important to winning the game, right? But—and I admit I didn't read that carefully—what event takes place here?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing. This area doesn't even allow monsters to appear. There are no hidden dungeons, secret passages, no traps to disarm nor treasures to discover. Nothing happens here."

"Then why waste so much time creating it?"

"Apparently, there used to be events here."

"In which version?"

"Beta. But it wasn't anything important. It had nothing to do with winning the game."

I heard some of the other knights mutter that they'd never heard of that before. Suddenly, I realized I was the

only one present who had played the older versions. Was I really that old?

"Ghost of the church," I announced.

"Huh?"

"When Fragment was online, there was a rumor among the play testers that a ghost appeared inside the church."

"You mean a ghost character?"

"Apparently, it looked like a man in his thirties. Obviously, we don't know what the operator looked like in real life, but that's how the avatar appeared. His face was gaunt, with green eyes, and he had wild, wavy white hair. It was rumored that he always appeared upside down."

"Say what?"

I shrugged.

"So what did the ghost do?"

"Nothing. That's the strange part. He just appeared in this church. He didn't say anything, do anything, and no spells or attacks seemed to affect him."

"Huh?"

"It's all speculation."

"You mean a rumor."

"That's what I said. After the beta test was completed and the final version of The World was released, the ghost of the church was no more."

"Was it a glitch?"

I breathed deeply. Didn't they teach these recruits any history? Maybe today they focused more on theory and code. I was about to continue when I saw something move in the lower corner of my perspective. Instinctively, I followed the movement. I couldn't believe what I saw.

It was the girl.

Her image was reflected on the smooth, polished surface of the floor. She was floating above us, near the ceiling. Somehow, she'd escaped being deleted. But how was that possible?

"She's above us!" I shouted.

The knights, not expecting danger, were slow to react. She wasn't. She headed for the door.

"Cover the door," I ordered. "Cover all the exits!"

How could she fly? Unless there were staircases or ladders, characters weren't allowed to move up or down on

the simulated 3-D map. Flying was against the rules of the game, but that didn't seem to stop her from defying the game's gravity.

The knights were reacting too slowly. She was going to escape. I only had one chance. I placed my target over her and toggled the debug command. Luckily, she was still in range. I swung my spear.

There was the familiar bright flash of white light that enveloped the girl. And then . . .

Static spilled into my ears with a deafening roar. The game image impossibly scattered and melted. As the girl disintegrated into the white flash, instead of disappearing, she transformed into a ball of red light.

It wasn't possible. I had landed a direct hit, but she wasn't deleted.

"Stop her!" I cried out.

But it was too late. I watched helplessly as the ball of red light sped past the knights like a bullet from a gun and shot through the open door of the church.

I chased after her, but compared to her lightning-fast speed, it seemed to take me forever to get to the doorway.

When I arrived, I tried to target her, but she was too fast, too far away. I watched as she streaked across the sky.

The church was on an island in the middle of a lake. The strip of red light shot straight up into the twilit sky, and then erupted like a burst of summer fireworks.

A shower of red sparks sprinkled across the sky as I muttered in disbelief, "She's gone."

Behind me, I heard the pendulums swing.

Tick-tock, tick-tock . . .

Area.1 Tacit Ruins

.: 1 :.

I threw an axe into a small spring that emerged from the withered wasteland.

An impish demon with oversized water drops for its eyes and nose popped out of the water like a jack-in-the-box.

"Did you drop a golden axe?" asked the spring demon, sounding bored. "Or this silver axe?"

A system window popped up on my screen, displaying the three answers I could select: Gold Axe, Silver Axe, or Neither.

I hit: Neither.

"Whaaat? Neither of them?" The spring demon sounded troubled by this answer.

"Hmmm . . . then take this!"

A sound effect chimed and the spring demon whooshed high into the air and then disappeared back into the spring with a great splash.

A message display indicated that I had obtained a new axe. This one was more powerful than the axe I had just tossed in.

Even though I had plenty of weapons, I still enjoyed seeing the spring demon perform his magic show. No matter what you tossed into the spring, he had to give you back something more powerful.

I checked the game screen again, this time to see where I was.

A map displayed itself in the upper right corner of my perspective. An arrow marked my direction. I turned toward the dungeon's entrance and ran across the wasteland as fast as I could.

Λ (Lambda) Server Zone: Dark, Inaccessible, Ruins

I activated my Fairy's Orb, a device that reveals and displays areas that have never been searched. A message popped up saying that a fairy was investigating. A moment later, the dungeon's hidden floor-map appeared in thorough detail.

It was a classic 3-D dungeon with rooms and passages extending four levels below ground. Special markers indicated treasures and hidden monsters.

"It looks pretty large," I muttered to myself.

Fortunately, I had a few cheats on my side. In this case, I entered the dungeon from the field and slipped straight down to the fourth level. This way, I didn't have to bother fighting every creature on levels one through three.

I quickly memorized the map and moved forward.

Spooky background music filled my ears as I entered. The dungeon resembled a demons' underground palace complete with stone walls that glowed red.

Suspended above the passageway was the corpse of a dead prisoner lying in what looked like a giant birdcage. His dried flesh clung to his bones. I targeted it for information, but it was out of range.

I ignored it and moved on.

There is a difference between something that can be targeted (like an object or creature that you can interact

with), and background imagery, which is only there to lend atmosphere and can't be picked up, moved, or altered in any way, no matter how much you hack at it. Sometimes doors are just decorations that lead nowhere and have nothing behind them. Windows might give you a view, but you can't break the glass or jump through them. In other words, anything that can't be targeted is meaningless eye candy.

However, the next door could be targeted, so I opened it.

Even though The World responds to voice chat from the internal microphone on my Face Mount Display (FMD), sometimes it's easier to key a door open than to speak the command.

Upon entering, I encountered my first creatures: three undead headless knights attacking with their swords in one hand, their skulls in the other. Pretty standard dungeon fare.

Their feet scraped harshly against the ground as they charged forward. I targeted the closest one and attacked.

A clean slice sent the creature's stamina gauge from green to red, indicating he was nearly dead. Another swing sent a barrage of armor and bones clanging against the walls.

The battle ended in seconds. These creatures were no challenge at my current level.

A clinking sound indicated that the last one had a blue treasure chest, which meant it was trapped. Using the item command, I selected my Fortune Wire that automatically removed the trap. Targeting the chest with it, I opened the box.

I was rewarded with another Fortune Wire.

That's it?! I hadn't gained anything, which wasn't new but was still disappointing. *Hopefully, they'll correct this when they finish the next upgrade.*

I checked the map. Every corridor and room was infested with monsters.

Hmm? Where should I go next?

Somewhere behind me, I heard a faint sound. Footsteps.

Spinning around, I turned back toward the direction from where I came. Had I missed a monster?

While in the darkness, I tried to target anything. I was surprised by what I had found: a little girl dressed completely in red without any shoes. Hard to believe such

a sweet image could exist in this nest of devils and demons. But there she was . . . alone, moving toward me with her head down.

"Huh?" she muttered as she collided into my character.

The girl stepped backward and noticed me for the first time. She appeared frightened as she hesitantly raised her hand and moved it toward my chest.

Her actions were too rich and natural for her to be just another player. Was she an event character?

I lowered my perspective and zoomed in on her face.

Her skin was like snow. If I looked closely, I could clearly make out each eyelash.

Her eyelids were closed. Was she blind? Perhaps that was why she hadn't seen me.

A chat window opened at the bottom of my perspective and the following text appeared:

`Lycoris: Help me.`

• ● •

December 24, 2005.

Every human being who's ever sat in front of a computer or a television knows this date. It was the day the Internet crisis occurred: the day the *Pluto Kiss* virus was launched.

Go ahead. Do a word search on *Pluto Kiss* and see what you find.

Of course, millions of other people are probably searching for the information at the exact same time, so you may have some difficulties. I'll give you a summary:

The *Pluto Kiss* tangled up and shut down the entire Internet. Powerful stuff, eh?

In response to the astronomical damages the virus caused, the United Nations, along with the World Network Council (WNC), ordered a limitation on Internet use until a solution could be found. The emerging net culture that had blossomed at the end of the twentieth century suddenly ground to a halt.

Stripped of the Internet during this crisis, people referred to this era as the Twilight of the New Gods. Of course, the Gods they worshipped were the Gods of technology.

It took two years before ALTIMIT OS proved to be completely resistant against the virus and a reliable service.

During that time, a new Internet system was built and the question of corporate management and responsibility was determined.

December 24, 2007, the anniversary of the virus, became known as The Mother Mary's Kiss. It was the day the WNC announced their Network Security Declaration that ended the Twilight. Limitations were removed and the Internet became available to everyone once more.

That same day, CyberConnect Corporation (CC Corp.) released The World.

It was called a Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) and was the first online role-playing game allowing large numbers of simultaneous players to coexist in the same world.

By the end of the first day, the game had been downloaded 4,576,623 times. By the end of the year (only a week later), that figure had nearly doubled.

It was the big bang of the new Internet world.

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Lycoris: Help me.

There was no voice to go with the text. I had to assume she was an NPC giving out her scripted message.

Lycoris: I want you to help me.

Lycoris. I guessed that was her name. I enabled the voice chat.

"What's wrong? Are you okay?"

There was a short time lag, maybe half a second, before my spoken words were converted to text by my FMD and appeared on the lower edge of my perspective:

Albireo: What's wrong? Are you okay?

That was the beauty of voice chat. Gone were the days of typing.

Lycoris: Help me. I need you to help me.
Albireo: What happened?
Lycoris: Please take me to the Divine
        Statue Room.

The chat window scrolled down as the conversation unfolded.

Albireo: Why?
Lycoris: I can't see.

I don't know why I had bothered conversing with her. She is an NPC. Everything she said is a pre-programmed response to player queries. But that's what role-playing in The World is all about—the illusion of reality in a make-believe world. Voice chat is simply another function to create a stronger illusion. But I could have said anything and she would have given me the exact programmed response. Just the same, I stayed in the conversation.

"Okay, Lycoris," I said into my microphone. "All I have to do is take you to the Divine Statue Room, right?"

That was so easy I didn't even need to think about it. After all, asking for assistance in a quest is a familiar gaming adventure.

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Usually, if you run into a PC (another person running an avatar), you can make verbal contact by using a microphone.

But NPCs don't work that way.

Under normal circumstances, event characters who make a request usually accept either a YES or NO

response. However, once I accepted Lycoris' quest, her setting automatically changed and she became attached to my character. Literally.

There are two perspectives, or point-of-view (POV) options, in The World. First-person sets the game camera's viewpoint through the character's eyes—you see what your character sees (that was my preferred point-of-view). Third-person sets the camera away from the player's character. In that mode, you can see your avatar.

Most players choose the third-person perspective because it gives a larger field of vision. However, first-person makes the experience more real.

I had toggled to third-person to make sure Lycoris was still following beside me, and I was surprised to find her character holding my hand.

I didn't have long to think about it before more creatures attacked. Lycoris moved behind me. She wasn't going to help me fight, but at least I didn't have to worry about her either. She didn't have a health gauge, meaning she couldn't be killed. I would have been more worried if I were with a low-level player character that needed protecting.

Not that it mattered. I made quick work of the creatures and we continued through a door that took us farther into the dungeon.

We entered a room containing an altar. Floating above the altar was a strange-looking statue. It was the Divine Statue Room, the place where she wanted to go.

That was easy, I thought to myself.

The Divine Statue was always located in the deepest part of the dungeon, making it the most difficult place to find. Consequently, the treasure found there was usually far more valuable than any other in the dungeon.

`Albireo: This is the Divine Statue Room.`

`Lycoris: Please open the treasure chest.`

I targeted the treasure chest and opened it.

`You've obtained eciov.cyl!`

"What the hell is this? A bug?" I wondered aloud.

It was a strange name for an item. Not only that, it had a file extension as part of its name. If it were a document, the extension would have been ".doc." If it were an executable file it would have been ".exe." But ".cyl?" I'd never heard of it.

Could it have been a mistake? An error that was missed during the last upgrade?

Instead of playing in The World, I was suddenly thinking about code and computers. It ruined the illusion of role-playing. Then my chat window opened.

`Lycoris: Please give me the eciov.cyl.`

NPCs' requests are nonnegotiable. The only way to continue with the event is to follow their instructions.

Using the trade command, I selected the item and okayed the trade even though Lycoris had nothing for me.

Still, there should've been some kind of reward for completing the quest. It could be gold, experience points, information, even another quest. But if this was a bug, I couldn't expect much. In fact, it could even cause my character data to be damaged or wiped out. I wondered if I should've traded.

"Thank you," she said. Only it wasn't as scrolling text. She spoke!

"Huh?"

"Thank you, Albireo."

I was shocked.

The World allows for full vocal communication, so it isn't strange for an NPC to speak. What was strange was that she should suddenly switch from text to verbal communication. Even more amazing, her lips were in sync with her words. Before I traded the file, her lips hadn't even moved.

As I looked at her face, she started to come to life.

What was happening?

I could still hear the background music and sound effects, so I knew my FMD speaker and PC were operating normally. Could something be wrong with the server?

No. The World is on ALTIMIT OS, which uses the finest fiber-optic cables available and has excellent bandwidth to accommodate the heavy traffic. So why the sudden change?

If Lycoris' voice had been prerecorded, they would have done all her lines that way. Maybe it was a program error that misread the voice link data. If that was the case, then this was a serious programmer error. Or maybe the event itself had changed and there was no way to rerecord the opening. Actually, that made some sense.

Silence.

The background music, the sound effects, everything was gone.

A virus?

My speaker began to vibrate with a deep bass noise.

"Albireo."

She called my name again.

"Lycoris?"

I tried looking at the little girl, but at that moment, a bright light formed a ring around my avatar.

My POV was enclosed inside the tunnel of light and I was lifted upward. When the light dissipated, I found myself teleported out of the Divine Statue Room.

Town Mac • Anu•

.: 1 :.

"What in the world is going on?" I muttered beneath my breath.

Below me, a gondola floated down the canal beneath my second story window. I watched it pass, trying not to think about the truly strange and unexpected turn of events. I knew she was waiting behind me, but I needed a moment.

The sound of traditional Irish music played in the background. There was a Gaelic theme in this town that I found rather soothing. That's why I chose Mac • Anu as my home. Or at least that's why I chose it as the homeland of my character, Albireo.

Δ (Delta) Server Zone:
Root Town, Port Town, Mac • Anu

It was good to be home, or as much of a home as you can have in The World. Colorful flags fluttered majestically along the cobblestone streets across from the canal. They represented Mac • Anu, which means Son of Goddess. Each flag bore the town's crest along with the town's symbolic elements: wind and water.

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Mac • Anu is a root town where players begin their journeys. There, players can buy whatever equipment they might need (weapons, armor, potions, information) and later store their acquired treasures. For those with more money than they know what to do with, such as myself, it is even possible to rent a home or a hideout.

There is really no point in renting a home, but if you have the gold to spare, it serves as a status symbol and allows you to display your trophies.

I watched the gondola continue north along the canal, until it disappeared underneath an arched bridge. The canal cut across the middle of the town leading toward the Chaos Gate. These gates are the only way to enter or leave the towns and are protected by a spell to keep monsters at bay.

The gates also act as teleporters. By selecting three words, such as dark, inaccessible, and ruins, a player can gate-in to the realm of his or her choice. The three words act as coordinates. In this case, the player will end up at the dark, inaccessible ruins.

Once in the field, characters can explore. It is always possible to gate-out of an adventure and return home, but never in the middle of a dungeon. To do that, a player will have to return to the surface first.

Even the surface has its dangers. The World is in the midst of a constant and violent battle between spirits and demons. Just because a player isn't wandering through a dungeon doesn't mean he or she can't be killed by whatever monsters roam the land.

A powerful Spirit Shield is cast to protect the towns from these creatures. But the Chaos Gate still remains the

weak seam in the fabric of the protective spell. Hence, the gates are also heavily guarded.

• ● •

I turned from the window and spoke her name under my breath. "Lycoris."

Her hair rustled gently like the canal water below. Her eyes remained closed, her face an enigma.

She hadn't uttered another word since she said my name in the dungeon. The great thing about The World is that all conversations can be reviewed. Even the spoken ones are recorded as text. I pulled up our earlier conversation and scrolled through the dialogue:

Lycoris: Thank you, Albireo.

Albireo. No two names can be alike in The World. I had spent three days thinking of names before I found one I really liked.

I spent another day on my character's design: boyish face, sinewy body, about twenty-years-old. I chose brown skin and black hair done in a wolf cut, unique even to The World.

I was equipped with sleeveless scale mail, leather gauntlets and boots, and a halberd (basically a spear with an axe blade at the end) as my primary weapon.

Of the six professional categories a player can choose from, I specialize in Pole Arms, which includes spears, pikes, and halberds. The other five include:

Blade User
Twin User (Weapon in each hand)
Heavy Blade (Two-handed weapons)
Heavy Axe
Wave Master (Spell-user)

Every weapon in The World is ranked by a number. If the number of two different weapons is the same, then spears and poles would retain a higher attacking power.

In other words, I would have the advantage over someone with a sword of equal value. The price to pay for that advantage was a limitation on armor. What I gained in attack, I lost in defense. But this was evened out by my personal Wave.

My avatar's upper arms were adorned with three white hexagons representing his Wave, earth.

There are six different realms that magic can be drawn from: earth, water, fire, wood, thunder, and darkness. Each realm provides unique strengths that allow its follower to launch different kinds of attacks or give extra defenses.

I switched my perspective to third-person. The view drew back, and I could see my avatar still holding hands with Lycoris.

"Albireo." She said it so fluently. With her voice! That was the troubling part. It couldn't have been preprogrammed. No two names can be alike in The World. That way each player has a unique name. It would be impossible to program every character's name just for this event. There were too many.

It's possible they could have articulated all the vocal sounds and put them together to form any name, but whenever computers do sims like that, they always sound awkward and inarticulate. She spoke my name perfectly.

How was she able to do that?

I moved Albireo around the room. Lycoris followed him everywhere.

How long was this going to last? I really didn't want to adventure with a kid tagging along. I guess I would have to see this event through before I could get rid of her. After all, that's how I got here in the first place. Once she took my hand, we had teleported from the dungeon to my home.

The only way to teleport out of a dungeon is to use Sprite Ocarina. But even that just teleports you back to the surface, not back to your home. Nothing can teleport you back home, that would involve breaking The World protocol.

Someone knocked on my door.

I switched back to first-person POV.

By targeting the door of my home, I enabled the conversation with whoever was on the other side.

"Who's there?"

I didn't have any player friends close enough for me to invite to my home. In fact, I've never allowed anyone inside my home. Lycoris was the first visitor—and she was forced upon me.

"Help!" called a voice.

What now?! I wondered.

"I'm being attacked by a creature!"

It was a female voice, very young, but that didn't mean anything. The player's real voice might've been disguised by a voice changer. For all I knew, the person running the character could've been a forty-year-old man living in his mother's basement.

"It's about to kill me! HELP!!!"

If the player had shouted that loudly in their real home, their neighbors would've called the police. But this couldn't be a monster, not running around a root town. These were safe havens.

"There are no monsters. It's impossible," I said.

"Tell that to that . . . thing!" the voice screamed.

"It's just a scary-looking character. Maybe it's a Player Killer?"

"It is NOT a player. It's a monster! Ahhhh!"

That's it. I'd had enough. I turned away from the door and saw a large, swooping shadow fall across the floor of my room. It was the shadow of something with wings. I ran to the window.

Flying outside was a harpy, a creature with the upper torso of a human woman and the lower torso of a raptor with wings and claws.

In other words: a monster.

I looked past her and noticed a host of other creatures storming the town. Players were hard at work defending themselves against the surprise onslaught. The evening sky was alive with demons; the streets flooded with creatures.

Then I remembered. At least once every few months, a staged attack against a root town would occur.

"This thing's too powerful for me!" the voice screamed.

Annoyed, I threw open the door. Sure enough, there was a goblin with an oversized spiked mace. The goblin's target was a cute girl with long, flowing hair down to her waist.

She was clearly a Wave Master. She wore a pointy witch's hat, a necklace, knee-high leather boots, and a revealing white bikini with a triangle and zigzag design representing her thunder Wave. Her only weapon was a long wand, ineffective for hand-to-hand combat.

I targeted her. Her name showed up on my screen: Hokuto.

"Good evening, Hokuto."

"Save the pleasantries and kill this thing!"

"What makes you think I'm so tough?"

"You own a home, don't you? You don't get that rich selling ale at the inn."

The goblin whacked her again. She tried defending herself, but she reacted too late. Her own swings were wild and panicky. I found it amusing.

"Your character's pretty cute."

I knew I shouldn't be flirting. She could be a kid. Assuming *she's* even a *she*.

"Thanks. Why don't you be the hero and save this damsel in distress," she teased.

"I think you can handle a simple goblin," I countered.

"Is that what this is? What's it doing in town? Wait . . . is this supposed to be an event?"

"Yeah. Monsters break through the Spirit Shield and invade every so often. The announcement's displayed on the official website page."

She must've been new to the game not to know this, I thought.

"Who wastes time reading that crap?"

"Me, I guess."

"Are you going to stand there, or are you going to help?"

"I'm thinking about it. Maybe you wouldn't be in this situation if you kept up with the boards."

"Fine. I'll read the boards religiously from now on. I'll memorize them. Just kill it!"

Whack! The goblin hit her over the head. It sounded painful.

I had long ago memorized the types of weaponry in The World so I would know how tough my opponents were. Hokuto's wand was very low-level, a beginner model, in fact. Anyone playing the game for even a few hours should've been able to upgrade.

"Are you a newbie?"

"I'm being sliced up by a lousy goblin! What do you think?"

I laughed.

"Don't just sit there!"

The goblin hit her again, but I was safe from its attacks. Nothing can happen to a player inside their home. Other characters may only enter if they're invited. And I wasn't about to invite either her or the goblin.

"Why can't I get inside?"

"You need an invite." She really didn't know the rules.

"Then do it!"

"Not a chance. I don't team up with other players or join parties. I'm a loner."

"Let me in or I'll die."

The goblin continued hitting her mercilessly. Whack, whack, whack!

But she wasn't dying. Was she using healing spells? I didn't notice her casting anything. Her health gauge should have been critically low by now.

"There's an old gaming adage: That which doesn't kill you makes you stronger."

"Thanks for the wisdom, jackass." She finally managed to dodge one of the goblin's blows. "You better hope I die. Because if I don't, I'm coming back to kill you."

I laughed. As if a first-level character could challenge me.

"Jerk!"

Whatever. I was about to shut the door when Lycoris appeared in front of me. *Hmmm . . . if she was in front of me, that would mean that she left my home. And if we were still holding hands that meant I . . .*

I shifted to third-person. We were both standing in the hall now. She had dragged me from the safety of my home.

"Damn it!" I grumbled as two additional goblins appeared from around the corner in attack mode.

"Damn it!" I said louder switching back to first-person POV. Then I used my attack skill—double sweep!

My spear arced sideways in a large semicircle. It only took one hit. Both goblins fell instantly. So did the third. It was a big sweep.

"It's about time you did something," said the witch kid.

Before I could make a snide comment, Lycoris spoke. "Look for their boss." It sounded like a command.

"Lycoris?"

Earlier, she ignored my every question. Now she was giving me orders!

"Find their boss, Albireo."

Again, she used my name.

As part of the invasion event there is always a boss, or commander, usually a high-level creature or evil warrior, who leads the attack. They are always the toughest creatures to fight.

Apparently, the invasion event was somehow connected to the Lycoris event. I guess that meant my adventure was continuing. I had to see it through. If nothing else, I had to learn how she was able to say my name.

"All right, Lycoris. I'll search for him."

"Thank you, Albireo."

It was time to go outside and face the flood.

.: 2 :.

Mac • Anu's main street was in absolute chaos. Spells erupted like fireworks. Weapons and claws were flailing. Even the game's background music had switched to a frenzied symphonic score to match the danger level everyone faced.

The streets were quickly filling with ghosts, players who died during the game. When a creature is killed, its body slowly vanishes from the screen. When a player dies, their character remains a silhouette, marking the place of their demise like a permanent shadow.

I heard someone's voice nearby. "Judging by the hellish nature of our enemy, I bet the boss is some kind of—"

A heavy blow from a giant ogre cut him off. The player's avatar instantly turned to shadow. He was dead.

Someone else finished the dead player's thoughts in my chat window:

Orca: The boss must be some kind of demon!

The voice chat system instantly translated the speaker's words into text.

"Probably a greater demon," I mused. But unlike the other voices, no one could hear mine.

There are different modes of chat in The World: Talk, Party, and Whisper. Talk Mode allows everyone within a certain radius to hear you. Party Mode, the most common, limits your conversations to those in your immediate group, usually your friends. Only those on a shared list could hear each other, and anyone else is excluded from listening. Whisper Mode allows you to directly talk to another person without anyone else overhearing.

Experienced players can quickly alternate through these modes, allowing a more sophisticated level of conversation than in reality. For example, a character could say something in Talk Mode, heard by all, then quickly switch to Whisper Mode and bad-mouth someone right next to them. Of course, you have to be careful you're in the right mode when you say a rude thing, or it could lead to trouble. Even ghosts can still chat with members of their party to plead for resurrections.

Because of these different modes, I wasn't bombarded by the hundreds of player voices surrounding me. Most people were in Party Mode so they would only communicate with their friends.

I was currently in Party Mode, but as a loner. I had no friends listed, meaning no one could hear me.

Someone in Talk Mode said, "We have to find the boss and kill him if we want to put an end to this invasion."

Orca: I agree. Let's go.

My brain ran through the various types of creatures we'd be up against so I could figure out what kind of boss might be in command. The majority of the creatures were a mix of goblins, ogres, harpies, and bats. Goblins and bats were nothing, but to command ogres and harpies would require a demon of great power.

Running through the main street, I was targeted by every creature I encountered. Having to deal with each creature before I could pass was becoming tedious.

Suddenly, four giant ogres surrounded me, barring my way like a wall of flesh. I could hear their simulated breathing through my speakers.

I shouted a command: "Double sweep!"

My halberd flashed through the air.

The breathing ceased. Their bodies toppled onto each other, piling into a small mountain before fading away like mist.

"Awesome!" someone shouted.

"He's powerful!" someone else yelled. Cheers leapt up all around me. I suddenly found every player's eyes turned toward me. Then someone began clapping.

Actions such as clapping can easily be typed into a keyboard with "/clap" so avatars would simulate the command. Using these commands allows avatars to express a wide range of emotions and actions.

I didn't have time for their gratitude. I was looking for the boss. It was the only way to see through the Lycoris event.

I pushed my way through the throngs of characters and creatures. When I reached the base of the arched bridge that crossed the canal, all hell broke loose.

A great cloud filled the air and then, with a mighty roar, burst into flame, turning nearly every character on the bridge into ghosts.

I found him.

The demon was more than twice as large as the ogres I had fought. Its head had two mighty horns and bat-like wings that spread wickedly from behind its back. When the creature smiled, a forked tongue wagged from its mouth and a pitched tail waved triumphantly. The monster resembled Satan.

My perspective trembled with every movement the demon made. This creature was powerful.

The remaining players near the bridge panicked. Some quickly tried to resurrect their fallen comrades with spells and reviving potions, but anyone reconstituted was returned to death an instant later when the demon unleashed its second attack.

The monster's power was unparalleled. Some of the weaker players felt it was unfair.

"This is a violation of the rules!" someone shouted.

The demon's third attack finished off everyone left on the bridge. There were only ghosts filling its expanse.

An eerie silence fell. There were no more resurrections. The dead remained dead. Everyone within the demon's range was annihilated.

"I've never seen anything so powerful," a voice said, dumbstruck.

"It's unstoppable," someone else echoed.

Turning, I noticed more characters appearing in town. Having heard of the event, people were logging in to get a glimpse of the powerful demon. At the same time, they were keeping their distance so they wouldn't lose their characters' lives. Few of them even had the power to damage the demon, much less take it on with any chance of winning.

I was amazed to see how many people could log in without slowing down The World's server. A voice brought me back to the matter at hand.

"Defeat the demon."

It was Lycoris speaking. Throughout the mayhem, she had managed to remain by my side.

"There will be other warriors who wish to share in this glory." I spoke in character.

"Defeat it, Albireo."

"As you wish."

There wasn't time to plan. If I was going to win MVP, I had to attack before any other high-level characters showed up.

I kept my POV in first-person. Seeing Lycoris running along beside me would have been too distracting during battle.

I charged.

The devil towered over me, forcing me to look up.

"Primary attack," I commanded.

My spear lashed out, striking the foul creature. It groaned with rage and flashed its menacing fangs at me in a wicked evil grin.

Its wings flapped, creating an explosive wind, before it unleashed the same spell that had just annihilated everyone on the bridge.

A black sphere crashed down, engulfing me before turning into a flash of fire.

I was expecting the worst, but I wasn't expecting this—my health gauge flashed red. I hadn't been this badly injured since my earliest days of gaming. As a solo player, there would be no one to resurrect me if I died. I could lose Albireo.

I quickly cast a fighting spell, upping my attack skills and toughening my defenses while downing a Full Recover Potion. My health turned back to green.

For now.

I launched a series of deadly attacks, spending as many skill points as I could. I knew the demon would have far greater endurance than any creature I had ever fought before.

The monster released a barrage of attacks that forced me to constantly drink healing potions to stay alive.

This fight was getting expensive.

My halberd made a distinctive noise when I attacked. Suddenly, I heard a new sound—somebody had joined the fray.

To an outsider, it might seem generous that someone would jump in to help, but in reality, they were hoping to strike the deathblow before I did. It was a competition. Whoever killed the creature would gain a large number of experience points.

Without warning, others joined the fracas. Like a pack of animals, they sensed weakness. The demon was being attacked on all sides.

But some players had jumped in too soon, and the demon turned them to shadows, or knocked them off the bridge and into the river.

I continued to attack, but in the melee, it was too difficult to determine the extent of damage I personally was inflicting.

The beast suddenly reeled and I knew it was time.

"Triple attack!"

A fierce combination of blows, the last being the most punishing, came from my weapon.

The monster fell.

My health gauge wasn't far from death either, and I quickly downed a few more rejuvenation potions to bring me up to normal levels.

The demon slowly faded, leaving behind a series of curses on my text screen before disappearing completely. Knowing the beast would probably be resurrected for another event in several months made my victory less satisfying.

After a monster falls, the computer calculates the MVP, or who did the most damage. While the player who strikes the deathblow gains a disproportionate amount of credit for the damage they did, I didn't have to worry about the others who tried to grab on to my glory. I knew I would win.

I could hear others chatting in Talk Mode around me.

"Who got the MVP?"

"Who do you think?"

"I bet it was that Pole Arms. He attacked the demon first."

"Yeah, but who got the deathblow?"

"Who knows, too many people were attacking. Could've been anyone."

I smiled. A moment later, a chest fell into my view. When a chest is awarded, only the player who wins can see

or open it. It would take the others a moment to check their screens to see who was declared MVP. When they did find out, I heard those who were in Talk Mode groan.

"Congratulations."

It was Orca. I looked up and saw him for the first time. He was a muscular, bare-chested Blade User. I switched to Talk.

"Thanks." I wasn't really interested in a conversation, so I turned away from him, targeted the chest, and then opened it.

"What did you get?"

I stared at the chest in disbelief.

"Was it worth it?" he asked.

"Uh . . . sorry. I have to go."

I had to apologize as I pushed past his character and fled down the street toward my home.

.: 3 :.

Lycoris' words repeatedly scrolled down my chat window as I led her down the side street and back home.

Lycoris: Please give me the rae.cyl.

Despite my attempts to ignore her, she wouldn't shut up.

"Please give me the rae.cyl."

It was a loop. She wouldn't quit unless I gave in to her request. It was the only way to proceed to the next phase of the event.

"Please give me the rae.cyl."

I toggled trade and gave it to her.

The file name was different, but it had the same unusual extension, "cyl." Could it be specific to The World?

I hated to be rude to the Blade User, but how could I explain that the treasure I won was some kind of encoded file? Besides, I hated drawing attention to myself, and I wasn't looking for company on my adventures.

I entered my building and headed back upstairs.

• ● •

Hokuto: There you are!

Her words flashed across my screen as she practically yelled them into my ear. I really wasn't in the mood for this.

Hokuto was waiting in front of my door. I targeted her so we could speak to each other.

"I see you survived the invasion."

"No thanks to you."

"I'd say you owe me a big thanks. I did kill the goblin."

"You were going to leave me to die. It was an accident that you popped out of your home. You weren't going to help me at all."

"Yeah, well . . . you're welcome."

"Hmph!" Her avatar's face switched to a furious expression and her arms folded in indignation.

"Are you one of those people who go online just to work out your real world frustrations?" I asked.

"What?! Listen, Al . . . Albion . . . Alborio . . ."

"It's Al-beer-ee-oh!"

"Whatever." She snorted.

"You don't have to shout all the time."

Why was she so noisy? And bothersome? And blocking my doorway?!

"I can hear you without you shouting. You don't have to be insulting as well."

Her avatar switched from furious anger to extreme rage. It was the highest degree of anger she could type in. At least I knew it wouldn't get any worse.

"Insulting? How am I being insulting?"

"By mocking my name? What if instead of Hokuto I called you Hoochie? How would that make you feel?

"You wouldn't dare!"

I wouldn't, but only because I was courteous. Besides, why was I being intimidated by a first-level character? I could kill her with one swing if I wanted to.

"Look, I spent three days coming up with my name. I don't appreciate—"

"Three days!"

"Yeah."

"Three days on *that* name?"

I sighed. She didn't get it. She wasn't into The World like most of the players I had encountered.

"It's common courtesy to be polite to strangers, especially since we don't have any idea who we could be in real life. For all you know, I could be your school principal." She was so insolent she had to be a teenager.

"So sorry. I didn't know you made up the rules of The World."

"It's not my rule. It's a commonly accepted rule of the online world everywhere. I'm sure you must have learned about this when——"

Why was I wasting my time?

"I've had enough. Goodbye."

I removed my target from her.

"Wait!" she shouted.

"Stop shouting!" I shouted back, before realizing she couldn't hear me. I targeted her again.

"Stop shouting."

"You're insanely high-level, aren't you? You blew away the goblin in one shot. But when you could've easily saved me, you didn't."

"There's no rule that says I have to save every player I see who's about to be killed."

"What about your 'courtesy'?"

"You're responsible for your own destiny in this world. You can thrive or die in The World at your own risk."

"That's not very nice."

"I still saved you, didn't I? Why are you so upset? Get over it. If you keep complaining, I'll report you to the GM."

"Who?"

"The Game Master." She still didn't get it. "The system administrators. They monitor everything."

"Why?"

"You can be flagged for being overly rude and obnoxious."

"How would they know?"

"The log."

Hokuto: ....

She typed that in to represent silence. I continued. Damn newbies.

"It's a record of our conversation. Everything we say is recorded by the log. And based on the common sense of The World, you would be considered at fault."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah."

"It keeps everything you say?"

This was exasperating. "Yes. Every shout, every rude word, every obnoxious comment."

"Then it would have a record of your sexual harassment."

"What?! What are you talking about?"

"Now who's shouting?"

I couldn't help myself. This girl, if she was a girl, was too much.

"That's it. I'm reporting you."

"Go ahead. And I'll report you. Tell me, which is more serious—someone who is merely rude or someone who is sexually harassing? You said I'd be flagged for my comment, but what would they do to you?"

I'd be blocked from The World.

"Yeah, but you're lying."

"Oh, really? And what about when you called me cute. You gawked at me, too."

"That? I was just . . . that was just my impression of your character."

"Wouldn't sound good coming from someone who could be my high school principal."

"But I'm not your . . ." She had a point. I had said some stupid things as well. But just because I called her "cute"

inside the game didn't mean I was sexually harassing her. However, if she reported it, the report would still be a mark on my file, even if it was a false one. Sometimes the system could be used against you too easily.

"How do you want to play it?" She was gloating. I could hear it in her voice. Her avatar's expression changed as well. She kept her arms crossed, but a wicked smile played across the witch's lips and she threw her head back. The expression she chose was "triumphantly smug."

Why wouldn't she go away?

"What do you want?" I asked.

"Your address."

"My what?"

"Give me your member address! I want to be friends!"

"Friends!" This was too much of a price to pay.

My head ached. I needed some aspirin.

"I'm waiting. Or do I report you to the system administrators?"

I toggled her an invite.

.: 4 :.

According to legend, if you invite a vampire into your home, you render yourself powerless against the creature. That's how I was feeling now.

"What a dump!" Hokuto said as she entered.

"Please, don't insult—"

"Why don't you have any furniture? Are you poor?"

"—my home."

Apparently, she doesn't realize how much money it costs just to rent a place.

"I prefer a minimalist look."

"Yeah, but I read some gaming magazine that described how people completely decked out their homes any way they wanted."

"Uh-huh."

"Not you, though."

"Guess not."

A rare moment of silence followed as she looked around the place. Unfortunately, it didn't last.

"Let's decorate."

"What?"

"C'mon, it'll be fun."

"For who?"

"This place is boring. It's drab. It's an eyesore."

"And it's mine. So leave it alone."

"Yeah, but it's ours now."

Ours? She didn't just say that. Did she?

"We'll place a sofa here, get pink curtains, maybe some throw rugs . . . oh, and over there we can put a fountain, or maybe a statue."

"Absolutely not."

"We'll have to get rid of this grungy table."

"Did you hear me?"

• ● •

An hour later, we were walking along the main street of the town. It's hard to believe that this was the site of a major battle a short while ago. But in the game world, once an event is over, it's over. Everything quickly returns to normal. Already, players were back to haggling over the prices of the merchants' wares and looking for the best deals.

"Where's a good place to buy magic armor?"

"Go to the Greedy Fighter."

"Where's that?"

"You need to go to a different server. Try Σ (Sigma)."

A little earlier, some of these same people were cheering my victory over the demon; now they didn't even remember me.

"Look at this idiot." Hokuto pointed out a stocky character with a giant muscular body and a tiny head who was carrying an awkward-looking, heavy axe. He was screaming at someone.

"They said it was a magic potion, but instead it's just normal healing water that you can buy off any cleric for a gold piece!"

Hokuto laughed.

"You think it's funny?"

"Of course. It's like he's advertising how stupid he is. I wouldn't be surprised if someone else rips him off in the next five minutes."

"Then learn from his mistake and don't scream in the middle of town."

We stopped at one of the shops and I targeted the owner, a stout fatherly merchant behind the counter.

"Welcome," he said in a friendly, enthusiastic voice. "I have many wares to sell. What are you interested in?"

A window appeared on my screen listing everything available.

"Not exactly like shopping at Saks," said Hokuto.

I gave her the silent treatment.

Albireo: ....

"Don't do that, it's annoying."

"You did it earlier."

"No, I didn't."

"Whatever. Just hurry up and pick what you want."

I hardly paid attention to the display and just hoped she wouldn't pick out anything too expensive. After all, it wasn't her money she was spending.

"You know what this reminds me of?"

"Hm?"

"It's like a couple choosing their furniture when they're moving in together for the first time." She typed in the command "/smile" and her avatar smiled.

I hoped she didn't think that applied to us. How did I let myself get roped into this ridiculous situation?

I saw her screen highlight several items. When she highlighted a couch, I decided to end the shopping spree.

"All right, that's the last item."

"What? But there's more stuff I wanna buy."

"You bought too much already."

I had a feeling she would've bought out the store if I'd let her.

I heard another character, a heavy Blade dressed as a samurai, arguing with the merchant.

"Come now, don't be so rigid. Cut me a discount. After all, look how much I've purchased from you."

He must be a newbie. He's talking to the merchant as if he's a character and not an NPC. It doesn't matter how much you buy, the prices are always the same.

It was time to go home. We left the building loaded with the new furniture. One of the advantages of purchasing in cyberspace, you never need a moving van.

Hokuto sounded more pleased once she finished arranging everything we'd purchased.

"There now! This isn't so bad. This place is starting to shape up." Hokuto typed "/yes" a couple of times, nodding twice.

The room looked awful. In no time, my carefully carved-out home had been transformed into Hokuto's private hideaway. The worst was the pink curtains.

"Are you satisfied, princess?"

Using a shortcut command, I shook my head. I found that there were five basic actions worth programming as shortcuts:

"**/look**" (stare)
"**/yes**" (nod)
"**/no**" (shake head)
"**/duck**" (shrug)
"**/bye**" (wave goodbye)

From my past experience, these actions usually covered just about any situation. I didn't think there were enough shortcuts for Hokuto to choose from. She was all over the emotional range, though her favorites seemed to be:

"/look_hard" (stare hard)
"/enth_yes" (nod enthusiastically)
"/vig_no" (vigorously shake head no)
"/infur" (look infuriated)
"/trium_smug" (throw head back arrogantly)

"Well . . . it's probably getting near your bedtime. Shouldn't you log out?"

"What? It's only nine o'clock. Who do you think I am, some elementary school brat who sleeps with a baby blanket and pees in her bed at night?"

Hmm, she's older than I thought. Maybe junior high or high school age, but definitely no older.

Instead of leaving, she sank down into the sofa. "Hey! Once you exchange member addresses, you can form a party, right?"

Any player who would ask such a stupid question shouldn't have the right to sit on an 198,000 GP sofa.

"Yeah."

I pulled up the address list. It used to be empty. Now one name haunted its otherwise empty space: Hokuto.

"How long has it been since you joined The World?" I asked.

"A week."

No wonder she's so inexperienced. Doesn't matter. I can remove her from my address list anytime, and block her from sending messages in the future. Once she's gone, I can sell all of this girlish furniture, even if I do take a big loss. Then I can buy back my favorite table.

"Hey! I have an idea!"

"We're not getting any more decorations for this place."

"Let's form a party together!"

"What?"

"Why not? We exchanged addresses, so let's do it! Please! Please! Please!"

Hokuto's avatar smiled brightly.

"I'm a solo player. Haven't I mentioned that like six hundred times?"

"Oh, boo-hoo, you like to play solo. Who cares? It's more fun to be in a party."

"Not for me."

"Well that's what I want to do."

"If you keep acting like this, no one will ever want to form a party with you."

"Acting like what?"

"Selfish!"

Silence. I stared at her and she stared at me. She was still sitting on the couch, but her avatar remained perfectly motionless. Then I heard her over my headphones. It was very faint, very quiet at first, but then it got louder, though I could tell she was trying to hold back.

She was crying.

"Oh, no. Don't tell me you're . . . you're not . . . crying . . . are you?"

She tried to choke back the tears, but it was useless. Why didn't she hit "mute" if she didn't want me to hear?

Her avatar finally moved. She got up and walked toward the door. It was odd to see her avatar's face looking so neutral while hearing the choked-back sobs coming from somewhere far away.

"I'm going," is all she said.

"Going? Where? Are you going outside to cry?"

"Yes. And I'll tell everyone that you abused me."

Give me a break. The log would back me up on this one. I couldn't recall ever having a worse day inside the game world. This was too much. But I still felt bad about making her cry.

"Look . . . I'm sorry." I hit an action command so my avatar would appear sorry as well.

"Really?"

"Yes. I mean it. I shouldn't have said that to you."

"So you admit it's your fault."

I muted my sigh, then continued, "Yes, it was all my fault. You don't have to go outside and cry. I wish you wouldn't cry at all."

She was definitely in junior high. She couldn't possibly be any older.

"If you're sorry, then you'll form a party with me."

I hit mute before the string of curses left my lips. I didn't want her to start crying again.

My silence didn't go over well. She began to whimper.

"All right! We'll," I couldn't believe I was saying this, "form a party."

I used the "/smile" command, which I hardly ever use, just to be nice about it. Then I pulled up the address list, selected Hokuto's name and sent an "invitation" to form a party.

"There. I invited you. Select 'OK' and you'll be——"

"Invitation Accepted" flashed across my screen before I could finish. Added to the lower part of my screen were Hokuto's health and skill point gauges.

"Yaaay!"

The tears that sounded so real a moment ago were now gone. Was she faking it?

"Oh, no."

"Now what's wrong?!"

"There's some kind of spirit in here."

What is she talking about? Is she insane?

"A spirit?"

"Guarding you? A girl."

Hokuto's eyes moved away and targeted something else in the room. Then I remembered. Lycoris.

"Didn't you see her before?"

"No. She just appeared the moment we became a party."

I didn't think of it before, but no one else had seemed to react to Lycoris when I was fighting or walking around the town. Apparently she was only visible to me. Well, me or anyone in my party.

But if she was invisible to anyone outside of the party, then for all I knew, there could be other invisible Lycoris characters floating around with other adventurers.

"Interesting."

"What's 'interesting'? Who is she? I thought you liked to work alone?"

"Her name is Lycoris. She's an event character."

"What's an event character?"

"Someone who begins an event, such as a quest or an adventure. Like a king who sends out adventurers to rescue his daughter, or a shady character who sells you a treasure map and later tries to steal the treasure from you. Each one begins some kind of event."

No, it wasn't possible for there to be more than one of each event character. What if two different groups teamed up to form a new party? It wouldn't work if each group was at a different stage of the event. Some players might have

progressed further than the others and that would screw up the adventure. There could only be one Lycoris event per server.

"Will you stop mumbling to yourself?" Hokuto yelled.

At the same moment, there was a knock on the door.

"Oh, no."

"What is it?"

In all my time in the game, no one had ever visited me. Now it was happening twice in one day.

.: 5 :.

"Hello! Do you remember me? We fought the boss together."

His name was displayed in my voice chat window. It was Orca, the guy who asked me what was in the chest after I killed the demon. I wonder if he named himself after the killer whale.

"Sorry about dropping in on you like this, but I saw you in front of the shop earlier and—"

"You followed me home?"

"Well, not at first. But then I thought it would be best to talk to you. I didn't mean to upset you."

"Not at all."

"Good." His voice suddenly changed tone. "You seem like a brave and hearty warrior. It would be an honor to buy a drink for such a valiant man as yourself."

He was role-playing. Sometimes people scoff at those who take the game too seriously, but it's widely accepted as another way to enjoy the game on a deeper level. After all, role-playing doesn't end when you choose your warrior class. There are secondary careers such as Informants who sell information on how to conquer the game for money, Traders who broker the items to be traded, and Singers and Comedians who perform on the street corners. One could even consider the Cobalt Knights to be a warrior subset.

I looked over Orca's avatar. He was a giant of a figure. His upper body was a ball of muscles covered only by a harness-belt and a piece of heavy shoulder armor. He carried his sword sheathed on his back. His Wave symbol was painted in white like an X crisscrossing his face and chest. The white

paint stood out in deep contrast to his dark green skin and copper-colored hair. For some reason, his midsection and lower arms were normal flesh tone, but everywhere else was green. He had chosen a truly unique look.

I set my chat mode to Whisper so that we could converse alone.

"What do you want?"

"I was impressed by the way you fought so fearlessly earlier. Without regard to your own well-being, without anyone to back you up or resurrect you should you fall, you still rushed in to attack the foul creature who corrupted this town with its vile presence and rained his evil armies down upon . . ."

"Please, get to the point."

"I have a proposition, demon-slayer."

"Go on?"

"I suggest that we should, er, well, that is . . . why don't we exchange member addresses?"

"Member addresses?"

"Yeah. So we could team up. You know, you could join our party."

Not again!

"What do you think?"

I cleared my throat. "I don't exchange member addresses with anyone. That's just the way I prefer to play. I'm sorry but you should look elsewhere."

"What about her?" He pointed past me.

Her? Could he see Lycoris? I turned. Hokuto stepped forward.

"Hello there! What're you talking about?"

The fact she was inside my home proved that we'd exchanged member addresses. I quickly continued. "She's the only exception I've ever made. Anyway, I don't like to form parties."

"But you've formed a party with her."

As if on cue, Hokuto butted in. "What is it? What're you talking about? I can't hear a word you say."

I switched to Hokuto and whispered, "Please, let me finish." Then I cut back to Orca, so she couldn't hear. "There's a reason she's here, but it's far too complicated to get into right now and . . . wait a minute. Did you say 'join our party'?"

"Uh, yes. I have a partner." Orca turned sideways and beckoned someone forward. Another Blade User appeared from around the corner of the hallway. I recognized him as another one of the players who jumped into the battle with the demon.

Orca introduced us. "His name is Balmung! He's my gaming partner."

"If he's a solo player, you shouldn't force him to join us." Balmung sounded annoyed.

I switched to Talk Mode. It is the only way to have a conversation with two or more players of another party. Of course, you can never tell what secret conversations are going on behind the scenes.

"How do you do, Balmung?" The name Balmung refers to the name of a famous sword in German mythology. Most common names from mythology or epic tales were quickly taken in the early days of The World. The fact that he had this name meant he'd been playing a long time.

Balmung resembled a valiant knight. Beneath his shock of white hair, he had classically handsome features, wore bright plate mail, and was armed with a thin, long dagger—a rare and highly ranked weapon.
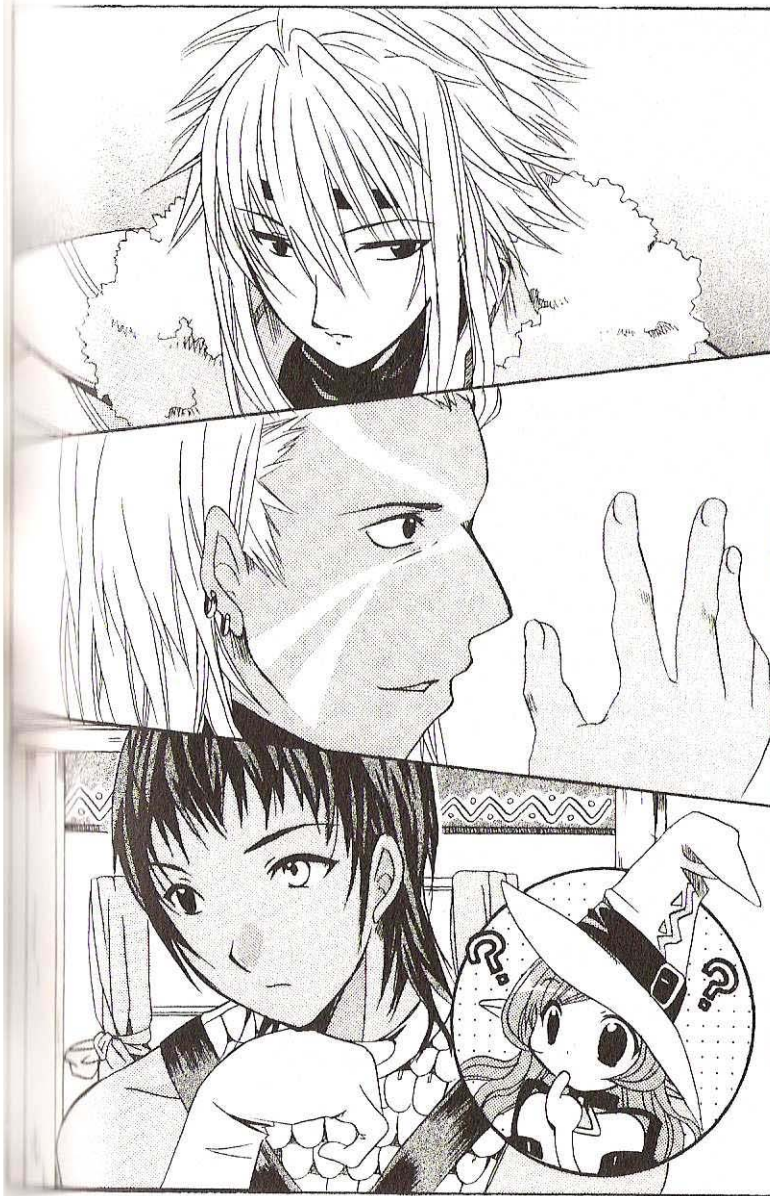
I zoomed in on his face. It was almost too handsome, suggesting that the player behind the character might be self-conscious about his looks in the real world. I wondered how young he was. It's a bit of a generalization, but most players over the age of twenty-five find it embarrassing to play the classic hero and prefer a more rugged character much like Orca had chosen.

"Hey, guys, what's up?" Hokuto couldn't have been more out of place in this group. I jumped to Whisper Mode and asked her to stay quiet and listen.

"So you're looking for a third to fill out your party?" I asked. The World limited parties to three players.

"That's right! It's not easy to find someone who's at our level. It's even more difficult finding someone that he approves of." Orca pointed at Balmung.

Balmung stared at me. "It's unusual to play solo inside The World."

The World recommends forming parties, only to ensure greater survivability and hence, greater enjoyment of the game. The only advantage of solo play is you get to keep everything you find.

"Maybe. But I get more experience points if I don't have to share with a group."

"Balmung used to be solo until he teamed up with me."

"Oh," I looked at Balmung with renewed interest. "Did you reach your current level as a solo player?"

"For the most part. I belonged to a party when I first started the game, but that didn't last long. I've been solo the entire time until I met Orca."

"That's pretty amazing."

"I find playing solo actually helps you survive. You don't get killed by your teammates' mistakes." His voice indicated a bitter experience from the past.

Of the two, Orca was clearly the more sociable one. He must have charmed Balmung into joining him.

"What is your plan once you acquire your party? I bet there's hardly an area now that you two couldn't conquer together. Why add a third?" These two were already in the top one percent of the more than fifteen million online players.

Orca responded. "As a matter of fact, we've recently discovered just such an area."

"Really? What's it called?" I asked.

"The One Sin," Balmung muttered.

His words brought a moment of silence.

.: 6 :.

I invited Orca and Balmung into my home. The One Sin wasn't something to be discussed in the hallway.

Orca was the first to comment as he looked around. "What a . . . cute home. I wouldn't have expected this from you."

"I decorated this room," Hokuto proudly stated.

"Yeah, I had nothing to do with it," I emphasized.

"Those curtains hurt my eyes," Balmung muttered. When I looked at them, I realized they hurt mine as well. I hate pink. What was I thinking?

We all sat down.

"Don't tell them anything about Lycoris," I whispered to Hokuto. Clearly, they couldn't see her or they would have commented on the little girl holding my hand by now.

"Why not?"

" 'Why not' what?" asked Orca. Hokuto had responded to me in Talk Mode, not Whisper. I forgot she'd only been playing a week and wouldn't be proficient in the subtleties of conversation that existed.

I could see Balmung looking at me. He knew I had whispered something to her. I could tell he was probably doing the same with Orca now. It gave me a second to talk to Hokuto.

"You don't need to reply. I'm in Whisper Mode, which means only you can hear me, so just listen quietly. Lycoris is . . . well, it's something we should clear together without letting the others know about it."

I would have preferred to clear the event on my own. But I had to keep her quiet about it. Players like Orca and Balmung were well connected in The World and kept up with the message boards. If they knew of Lycoris, they would start threads to learn more and soon word would get out about the little girl dressed in red. I didn't want that. The one advantage of having a newbie in my group was that she wasn't connected to anyone or anything in

The World. And I already knew she didn't bother with the boards.

"Got it!" she said.

Orca turned to her again. "Got what? What are you talking about?"

Why wouldn't she listen?! I decided to quickly change the topic. "So tell me about The One Sin, Orca."

"Right," said Orca. I could tell he was beginning to have his doubts about me.

"I heard it's the highest difficulty level within The World," I continued.

"It's more than that. These days it's become infamous as a Player Killer of all levels. Even mid-level characters are killed without so much as slaying a single guardian. It's supposed to be impossible to conquer and they say no one is strong enough to stand up to the event's boss."

"But that's just a rumor."

"You've heard of The One Sin then?"

"Yes."

"Do you know the three coordinate words to get there?"

"I think they're Captive, Fallen, and Angel. I've been there before. Not that I tried conquering the area."

Balmung leaned in. "It's impossible . . . for a solo player."

"Because you can't be resurrected."

"But The One Sin can be conquered," Orca asserted.

"Why do you think that?"

Balmung answered this time. "If there is an event so difficult that it cannot be cleared, that's a bug in the system. That would mean The World is flawed."

Orca jumped in. "And we don't believe that. We think it's a good game and if it is good then there must be balance."

"That's why you believe you can conquer the area? Because it would mean The World is defective if you couldn't?"

"Absolutely! I believe in this world." Orca nodded his head.

I was beginning to like Orca. Not just the character, but the player behind him. I wondered how old he was. Most players were young, even the "old-timers."

"You two really love The World, don't you?"

Orca was surprised by my question. "Of course! So do you, Albireo, or you wouldn't have developed your character this far. You must be attached to him."

"You're right about that."

Balmung stared in my direction. "Albireo?"

"Yes?"

"We recognize most of the weapons in The World just by looking at them. But yours . . ."

"You mean this?" I held up my halberd. But this was no ordinary halberd, and its beautiful decorative design set it apart as a rare item. Clearly Orca and Balmung had been whispering about it.

"Where did you get it?" Orca asked. "Is it a reward from an event? What's the name of the spear?"

"I'm afraid I can't tell you."

"Why?"

"It's a secret."

"Secret?" Balmung sounded skeptical.

"I won't tell you. Leave it at that."

Balmung continued, "I hope it's not a cheat item."

Orca jumped in. "Balmung! Enough!" He turned toward me. "I'm sorry, Albireo, he didn't—"

"No. It's a legitimate concern. I understand why you would think that since I wasn't straightforward with you. It's the Divine Spear of Wotan."

"What's that?" Orca asked, but I knew Balmung would understand its origin.

"The legendary spear from the 'Ring of the Nibelung,'" Balmung responded.

"I figured you would know."

Balmung nodded, but Orca still looked puzzled.

"One interpretation of Wagner's opera is that Wotan's Spear is what carries out the God's order, and is treated as the symbol of both contract and authority."

"Opera?" asked Orca.

"A composer created an opera based on the epic poem 'Song of the Nibelungs.' It's from a mixture of Germanic and Icelandic legends that Wagner put together in what is known as the 'Ring of the Nibelung.' It's about a dwarf who steals some magic gold that he hopes will make him all-powerful. Instead, he brings

about a series of events that eventually causes the fall of the Gods. One of those Gods is Wotan. The hero in the epic is Siegfried and I named myself after the sword he carried, Balmung."

"I had no idea you were so knowledgeable, Balmung."

"I based my name upon the legend. It's truly magnificent. You should look into it sometime."

Orca shrugged. "Yeah, maybe." Orca clearly preferred hack-and-slash adventure over the subtleties of myth and story.

"The question is," Balmung continued, "where did you get it?"

"He doesn't have to tell us that," Orca said.

"No, it's all right. I don't want there to be any mis-understandings between us. I'll be direct, but I trust I have your confidence in this matter."

They both agreed.

"This spear is from the era of Fragment."

"You mean the beta version?" Orca's voice turned up a notch. "Albireo, you were one of the original test players?"

"Yes."

"Awesome! That's totally awesome, isn't it, Balmung?" Orca was excited. "Balmung was one of them, too!"

"You were a test player for the beta version?" That meant he'd been around longer than I thought. No wonder he was able to obtain a name from myth.

Orca continued, "I heard only 1,024 players were selected from the general public. Damn, I'm jealous!"

Balmung remained silent.

"This spear cannot be obtained in the current version of The World. That's why I didn't want to talk about it."

"Of course! Something from Fragment . . . it's a true artifact. I'm sure there's no shortage of players who would want it. Pretty badly, I imagine."

"I have no intention of giving it up. But if others knew, then I'd be constantly bothered by players wanting to make me offers in trade."

"Not to mention someone who might try to kill you for it. At least you're powerful enough not to worry about that."

"Again, I would like your reassurance. Since I was straightforward with you, hold my confidence dear and don't say a word about this spear to anyone else."

"I'll forget we ever talked about it." Orca smiled.

I typed in and returned the gesture.

Orca changed tones. "So, Albireo, let's get back to the matter at hand."

"I'm sorry, but I can't join your party." I didn't mean to be so blunt, but I wanted to make it as clear as possible.

"I see . . ."

"Let me explain. I'm currently in the middle of an event. I'm afraid I must continue until it's over. I can't leave. Sorry about that."

"Well, it's disappointing." Orca sighed. "But it can't be helped."

"I just want you both to know, you guys are the very first players I felt like forming a party with inside The World."

Orca smiled brightly. "That's great to hear!"

"I'll keep your addresses. If you happen to need help, send me a message. Although I can't team up, I still might be able to help out in an emergency."

"Thanks!"

"I'm online pretty much every day."

"Me too! Except when I have exams. That's the only time my parents forbid me to play online." Orca's younger than I thought. He's probably still in high school.

"Yeah, there's no greater threat to The World than parents."

"Doesn't matter how high-level you are, they're the one boss that's impossible to defeat." He laughed.

Balmung got up. "Let's go, Orca. We're done here."

Orca stood, still laughing. "All right. Balmung hates to hear about real life in The World."

"Don't talk about something that's so irrelevant," Balmung shot out bitterly.

"You see. Oh well, it just proves how much he enjoys the game."

"Orca!" Balmung yelled.

"I understand how you feel, Balmung."

In fact, I was quite similar to him. I admired both of them, Orca for his warmth and directness, Balmung for his love of the game.

"We're challenging The One Sin tomorrow morning at nine a.m. Wish us luck."

"Good luck. I mean it."

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They left. Even though we had just met, I felt like I was saying goodbye to friends. It had been a long time since I felt that way. Actually, I hadn't felt this good since I first played in The World and everything was new and exciting.

"They seem pretty cool." I turned toward Hokuto. "You can unzip your mouth now."

Hokuto let out a gasp of air. She breathed in and out dramatically to show how restrained she was.

"I'm impressed. You were surprisingly quiet."

"Because I didn't understand a word you said!"

How could she? Most newbies wouldn't understand the intricacies of what we were discussing. But it didn't matter, the game was what you made of it. It was there for everyone to enjoy at any level.

I yawned. "It's about time I drop out."

"Drop out?"

"You know, log out. I have to leave the game."

"Wait. You're going? Now?!"

I selected the logout command. I realized I probably shouldn't return to my home for a while. In fact, I wondered if maybe I should abandon it altogether. Then I could block Hokuto so I wouldn't receive messages from her anymore. That way, I'd be done with the wearisome wicked witch.

Hokuto looked at me. "What's wrong?"

Several seconds passed.

"Why aren't you leaving? Say something."

"I can't do it."

"Can't do what?"

"I can't log out."

I switched to third-person POV. I could see all three characters, Albireo, Hokuto, and Lycoris, standing in the middle of my gaudily decorated home.

I realized Lycoris had been quiet ever since I handed her the second item.

"You can't log out?" Hokuto asked.

"I can't pull myself out of the game screen."

Normally, if a player selects the logout command from the root town, the screen returns to the top page of The World. It's like placing a bookmark where you last left off. But this time it wasn't working.

I knew it couldn't be the system. ALTIMIT OS is infallible. Problems such as disconnections, which happened all the time in the old era, never happen anymore.

Never!

There wasn't even an error message saying why it wasn't working. I was stuck in the game.

"I got it!" Hokuto said. "Why don't you call that person you mentioned? The ones who keep their eyes on everything. The BM?"

"You mean the GM?"

"Yeah, the systems guys!"

CC Corp., which runs the game, always has operators ready to help if a problem or glitch should occur. They are on twenty-four-hour standby in case a problem develops. But the problems they deal with are outlined in the User Agreement, and I didn't think it would include this.

"It isn't proper to call up the system administrators for a troubleshooting problem."

"But aren't they supposed to support the users?"

"Yes, But they're only to be used in an emergency. So far, this isn't one. Usually when something like this happens, it's temporary. It'll probably fix itself in a moment."

I decided to take it easy. After all, this wasn't really a big deal.

"Maybe it's the girl."

"Who? Lycoris?"

"Yeah. Maybe she doesn't want to let Al go?"

"Al? Who's Al?"

"You. Your name's too long and complicated-sounding, so I'm going to call you Al. And I think I'll call her Lyco. It's better, don't you think?"

I rolled my eyes and hit the dot, dot, dot key for silence, indicating I had no opinion on the matter. I thought it best to let her do what she wanted. It was better than arguing.

"Hey, Al."

I sighed. "What?"

Hokuto stood up from the sofa, and approached me so closely that her face covered my entire screen.

"Your eyes are two different colors. One is blue and the other is yellow."

"I know. That's what I wanted."

"Why? Are you trying to look cool?"

"AFK," I shot back.

"AFK?"

"It means 'Away From Keyboard.' I'm leaving my PC with-out disconnecting. My character will remain where he is."

"Wait. What about me?"

"Go play outside. I'll disband the party."

I selected "disband." Hokuto's HP disappeared from my screen. On her screen, Albireo's gauge should have disappeared, too.

"Good night." And good riddance.

Someone was knocking. When I removed the FMD, I saw a fresh-faced kid standing on the other side of the glass door. He'd been working for me for over a month, but I could never remember his name.

"The papers you requested, Watarai." He laid them down on my desk.

"Thanks." I thumbed through them while he waited for further instructions. Then I asked, "Any new reports on the Vagrant AI we missed the other day?"

"Nothing yet. But we've increased our patrols."

I leaned back in my chair and looked past the kid through the glass wall of my office. I stared out at the sea of cubicles; the right angles of their partitioned walls seemed

to stretch outward like an Escher drawing. I used to be assigned to one of those cubicles until I earned this office. It wasn't very large, but at least it was mine.

"We're looking into every bug report that comes in," the kid said nervously to fill the silence.

"And there's no new information or witnesses?"

He shook his head. "But the report we received the day before yesterday was dead on! We missed our shot."

"The AIs are getting shiftier. Their functionality has increased so they know how to evade us. They never stay in the same place for long."

"When did Vagrant AIs first appear?" the kid asked.

"Basic ones were first discovered in the beta version. But the Vagrant AIs at that time couldn't even send out text messages, let alone move around the system. Not only that, but they weren't smart enough to evade being deleted. Since they couldn't gate-out of their realm, they were stuck in one place until we found them."

"But they're evolving?"

"I don't care for the word *evolve*. It makes them sound as if they're alive. They're not." I moved the stack of papers to the side of my desk. "If you are not scheduled to join the Brigade patrols, you can go home early."

"Sounds good. Thanks."

"Unless you want to get in some overtime without pay. You know, impress the boss."

"Uh, I'm happy to go home."

No ambition. That was the problem with many of the kids today. Hired right after graduation, he did what he was told, earned his paycheck, and never strived for more. Maybe it would be different if he'd been assigned to the game development section. That's where most people wanted to be.

Unlike the sterile corporate atmosphere on this floor, the gamers decorated their offices with posters and artwork, played loud music, and generally had more fun. It was like being in college, only you were getting paid to be there. But this kid was assigned to me because he didn't do well enough in his training sessions. They made him a flunky.

"Any plans for tonight?" I asked.

"Not really. I might actually jump online, but . . ." he trailed off. "It's weird, when I was a student I was totally

into the game. I used to skip classes and give up sleep to play, but now that I work here . . ."

"You lost interest, right?"

"Not exactly. But it's different somehow."

"Maybe if you had studied for your exams more instead of wasting all your time online, you'd be working for a better company," I joked.

He laughed. "If there's a better company than ours, show it to me." He straightened up. "No, what I meant was I approach it differently. Before, I used to always check out the bulletin boards (BBS) to gather information on how to conquer the game or roam about an area searching for rare items. And now, I've stopped doing things like that."

"It's an occupational disease."

"Sir?"

"It's lost some of its mystique for you. People who are involved with the production and administration of the game become less informed about the game than the players. It's common."

"Yeah, I guess that's it. Anything beyond the area of my responsibility is rather hard to keep up with."

"Never forget the love you first felt for The World. Currently, that's the only merit you've got. Otherwise, you'll remain an errand boy the rest of your career."

"But eventually I'll get some online responsibilities, right?"

"Not until you've earned some seniority." I wondered if he'd take my hint.

"I heard you participated in localizing the Japanese version of The World. That true?"

Did he think that asking me about my past counted as overtime? "Yes, I did."

"That's so awesome!"

Since he reacted to my news like a fanboy, I thought I'd impress him with my story. "I started here the year CC Corp. was established. In fact, I was a newbie like you and joined in on the project shortly after it started."

"Who was the team leader?"

"Tokuoka. He's no longer with the company, but you may have heard of him."

"No, I haven't. But people come in and out of the game industry pretty fast, don't they?"

"Sure. High turnover is part of the industry. Do you think you made a mistake by joining this business?"

"Not at all. What else would I be doing right now, flipping burgers? No thanks. So tell me more about this Tokuoka guy?"

I took a sip of the instant coffee that had been sitting on my desk for hours. It not only looked like mud, it tasted like it, too. "He was pretty interesting. Eccentric."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, speaking of flipping burgers, he always ate the same thing for dinner every night. A plain hamburger with French fries and a Coke. Because I was just starting out like you back then, I was often the errand boy they sent to McDonald's. Every night, he ate the same damn thing."

"That is strange."

"That's just for starters. Back then, we didn't use time cards like we do now. Instead, we were on Tokuoka Time."

"Huh?"

"Tokuoka used to pile up blankets and couch cushions and sleep on the floor in his office. Whenever he woke up and climbed out of his makeshift sleeping bag, that was

considered morning; when he stopped for his first meal, that was 'noon,' and if he went out to drink, that was 'evening.' Didn't matter if morning was three in the afternoon and evening was actually dawn—that was Tokuoka Time."

"Wow. It doesn't sound like he got out much."

"Not really. I think the only women he talked to were those who worked here or anyone he encountered in restaurants. He was very asexual." I took another sip of the coffee and wondered why I didn't just send the kid out to make me a fresh pot. "The only time I remember him taking days off were the three days that he became so sick with fever he was rushed to the hospital. Once the fever was down, even though he was still ill, he went right back to work."

"How sad. Doesn't sound like he had any fun."

"He did have one small vice, one indulgence that he allowed himself. He smoked." I held back the best for last. "Without leaving the building."

"Isn't that against the law?"

"Sure, and it's against company policy. But no one's going to tell the man who's designing the company's

premium software what he can or can't do." I leaned back in my chair as I reflected on the past. "I still remember the smell of those cigarettes. The aroma is practically burned into my brain. He used to smoke this sweet Indonesian cigarette called Garam. It comes in a can. Have you seen them before? Each can holds thirty-six cigarettes. He'd go through a can a day. His office reeked of the smoke and his monitor would turn yellow within a month. They had to keep replacing them."

"Damn."

"Yeah, he was pretty unique. Definitely not your typical CC Corp. employee. In fact, he only wore Hawaiian shirts to work, and always listened to music through a set of headphones. I didn't find out till later that he loved hard rock bands like Van Halen and Deep Purple."

"Really?"

"Of course, you have to remember that the old triple-C was a start-up venture back then. Almost any computer company with any kind of vision had someone like Tokuoka working for them. Remember that everyone had lost their jobs after *Pluto Kiss,* so they gathered together as many

programmers, designers, planners, and artists as they could to work on the localization process. Of course, it wasn't really *that* localized since they were trying to start the same system in ten different languages throughout the world. The real world, that is.

"In fact, Tokuoka used to scream about how difficult it was to combine all these different systems and link them up, but you can't tell upper management what they don't want to hear. They wanted something done and it was up to Tokuoka and others like him to make it happen. And that's exactly what they did."

The kid shifted on his feet. I think he wanted to sit down, but I kept on going. "Back then, we didn't worry about interoffice politics or getting promoted. We worked our asses off day and night just to get things done. It was hard work, but it was fun. Eventually, it paid off." I spread my arms indicating my office, but the kid didn't even notice.

"So what happened to this guy? Why did Tokuoka leave the company?"

"How the hell do I know? One day he just left. Probably because the company became too big."

The kid looked at me funny. I continued, "After ALTIMIT OS was established and The World came into being, CC Corp. grew to epic proportions and, as you know, now leads the world in entertainment software. It became a giant bureaucracy where individualism was no longer encouraged. I'm guessing Tokuoka's eccentricities were no longer as tolerable and he constantly clashed with management. I also think he didn't feel properly thanked for all his hard work.

"After all, the sales of the original Japanese version of the game matched those of the English version. That wouldn't have happened if it wasn't for him. But no one respected him anymore; at least not the new managers who came in and took over when the company went public. Only the old crew, people such as myself, knew how hard he worked to accomplish what he achieved. That's part of why I continue working here. I consider Tokuoka a mentor, and because I respect his vision, I work hard to preserve The World and make sure it continues to thrive and succeed."

I had become caught up in my own story. While I could tell the kid was impressed, I'm not sure he appreciated everything I was telling him.

"Wow! That kinda helps explain why you're so involved with the Cobalt Knights. Because it helps you stay in touch with the game."

"Not exactly. Let me ask you this. The World severely punishes cheaters. Do you know why that is?"

"Well, because . . . they cheat."

"It's a little more complicated than that. Let me explain." I sighed. "In an offline game, a player can cheat all he wants and there are no consequences. It's no big deal because he's really only cheating himself out of the full game experience. However, when someone cheats in an online game, it affects other players. Not only isn't it fair, but it also destroys game balance.

"When someone cheats, part of The World shifts, and the more cheaters, the more the shift becomes uneven, until the entire game could be unhinged. Not only would that drive away players, but that would drive away business. So it's important, not only from a business viewpoint, but from a gaming standpoint, to keep everything fair. We must not allow anyone to cheat. And that's why no matter how small the bug is, we must delete it. Because the system must run smoothly."

"That's why the Cobalt Knights were created, right?"

"Right. Even though we're part of system administration, unlike the GMs who assist and support players, we debug. That's why we don't talk to or deal with players. We don't want them to know there are flaws in the system, ghosts in the machine. We operate behind the scenes."

"We're kind of like an elite military unit?"

"Yeah, sure." I started flipping through the papers he gave me.

"We move in the darkness."

"Uh-huh." I had hoped to inspire him to work longer hours, not lecture him on company history. Instead of inspiring him to work longer, I had let him waste *my* time.

"So getting in touch with players is forbidden because we might reveal our hidden mission."

"As usual, you've missed the point completely. I'm sure you'll remain an errand boy for a while."

"Huh?"

"What's this?" I held up a piece of paper near the bottom of the stack he handed me.

"That? Oh, that's something I found on one of the bulletin boards. It sounded interesting so I copied it. I must have mistakenly grabbed it when I was bringing over your documents."

I read the paper.

Subject: RE: Please tell me about the
Epitaph of the Twilight!
Message by: W. B. Yates
Here is the Preface to the *Epitaph of the Twilight*

Yet to return, the shadowed one.
Who quests for the Twilight Dragon
Rumbles the Dark Hearth,
And Helba, Queen of the Dark,
has raised finally her army.
Apeiron, King of Light, beckons.
At the base of the rainbow they meet.
Against the abominable Wave,
together they fight.
Alba's lake boils.

Light's great tree doth fall.
Power—all now to droplets turned
in the temple of Arche Koeln.
Returns to nothing,
this world of shadowless ones.
Never to return, the shadowless one.
Who quests for the Twilight Dragon.

On the night before the
evil spirits threaten the town,
W. B. Yates

I looked up to see the kid holding out his hand expecting me to return the paper to him. "Where did you find this?"

"It was posted by a player who responded to a question about the *Epitaph of the Twilight*. Sounds pretty interesting, don't you think?"

I looked down at the paper again. The message was dated yesterday. "W. B. Yates, huh?"

"I sort of recognize that name. I think I saw it when I was playing The World as a student."

"He's a pretty famous player. He's been online ever since the beta version."

"You mean he's one of the original test players?"

"Must be. I remember seeing a posting by Yates back then regarding the web novel on which Fragment was supposed to be based. I remember he called himself a net poet."

"Poet?"

"He's role-playing a minstrel in The World. He'd wander into an event, sing an improvised poem, and post it on the BBS. He's a fairly talented writer. Regardless, this web novel is pretty well known."

"Is that right?"

"You'll easily find it if you do a search."

"Maybe I'll look it up later tonight."

I finished my coffee and stood up. "Go home."

"Is that where you're headed?"

"No. I'm going to the nap room."

"You're staying overnight again? Are you trying to create Watarai Time?"

"At least I don't have to sleep on the floor. The bed in the nap room is pretty comfortable and it saves me the commute."

"Damn, chief, you're putting in too many hours on this thing."

• • •

I walked the kid to the elevator and then turned down the aisle toward the nap room. Maybe he was right. I had been working hard. But that was part of the job, always had been.

I turned off any unnecessary lights as I walked down the corridor. I hated to see waste of any kind, especially electricity. Part of growing up a conservationist, I guess.

I realized how loudly my footsteps echoed in the empty building as I walked across the floor. During the day, I never would have noticed the sound, but in the vacuum of ambient noise, it sounded like thunder.

When I arrived in the nap room, I shut the door and turned out the lights. But I couldn't stop thinking about the Vagrant AI. Her image haunted me in the darkness. I couldn't take my mind off her red dress and how she turned into that fireball. I wondered, how did she come into existence? Could someone have programmed her? That's when a name jumped into my head.

Harald Hoerwick.

He was the original programmer of the beta version of The World, the authority on AI research, and an all-around genius. I never met him since he worked in the United States, but everyone who knows the history of CC Corp. and The World has heard of him.

Originally, the game data of The World was stored in a blackbox folder to which Harald attached a lock. Few knew of the folder's existence. In fact, only those who were deeply involved with the game's development and production had ever heard of it. When I learned about the folder, I had to sign a confidentiality agreement. I wasn't allowed to talk about it.

There were even rumors that it was a program that automatically generated a functioning NPC. Now that was an idea worth contemplating; an NPC who talks and behaves on its own, not by the distributed processing of the computer. That meant interaction between players and NPCs would be no different than between players themselves—or humans if that's even possible. That would truly be the ultimate game—the simulation of reality.

.hack // AI buster

If voice simulation and authentic-sounding dialogue were perfected, then you would be unable to determine if the characters encountered inside the game were human or AI.

Too bad Harald Hoerwick disappeared before the beta version was released. That left a lock without a key.

I didn't sleep very well the rest of the night.

Area.2 Bad Angel

.: 1 :.

When I reactivated my PC from sleep mode, I could see my newly redecorated home from the night before on the screen display. I winced at the pink.

Lycoris still waited patiently, holding Albireo's hand. Because she was an NPC, it meant nothing for her to wait through the hours of inactivity as my avatar sat with her.

Fortunately, Hokuto was gone. She probably left shortly after I did.

I tried again to log out, but couldn't. The situation hadn't been fixed. The bug, whatever it was, remained.

I wondered how long this had been going on. Were other players locked into the game as well? Or did this have

something to do with Lycoris? After all, the situation had been spiraling downward since she showed up.

But how could the event affect the logout command? Besides, in terms of actual game play, there hadn't been any specific problems to speak of.

I opened the chat window and checked the log. Because I hadn't logged out, the previous night's conversation remained.

```
Hokuto: Wait. What about me?
Albireo: Go play outside. I'll disband
         the party. Good night.
```

I checked the time. It was 8:45 a.m. Instead of staring at the flat screen of my PC monitor, I put on my FMD. Instantly, everything became more real. Again, I leapt into the form of Albireo. He came to life.

I switched back to first-person POV and walked to the door. Without looking, I knew that Lycoris followed silently.

I realized that in order to clear the Lycoris event, I had to complete the tasks. Maybe then everything would return to normal.

But there was still much to be explained. How did she find me in that dark dungeon? Why did her eyes remain shut? What were the treasures I kept picking up with the odd file extensions?

Whenever you get stuck in the middle of a game or event, it's important to search everywhere for the hidden clue. Usually, it's something you missed; something you accidentally passed by and didn't pick up. The solution is to run through all the areas again and target everything until you find the lost piece of information. Only the place I wanted to go wasn't anywhere I'd been before. Nevertheless, it's where I decided to go.

I don't know why, but as I headed to the door, I muttered to myself, "Let's go, Lycoris."

To my utter shock and amazement, she responded, "Where are we going?"

I dropped the controller onto the floor. Quickly, I picked it up and looked in Lycoris' direction. "What did you say?"

"I asked, where are we going?"

This was too much. An NPC in voice-chat mode who could give an apparently unprogrammed response?!

Though her eyes remained closed, her face was turned toward mine. I found my hands moist with sweat. No NPC had ever been able to chat like this before. This was too responsive.

Hesitantly, I answered, "We're going to the area known as 'Captive, Fallen, Angel.'"

"Okay. Orca and Balmung will be there at nine."

"What the f—?" Before I could finish, Lycoris held up her left hand toward the ceiling. A bright light formed a ring above us and my speaker suddenly vibrated with such intensity, it nearly buzzed off my desktop. We were swallowed up in the tunnel of light and teleported outside of my home.

.: 2 :.

I found myself in the midst of a violent snowstorm, most of my screen covered with the white swirls of a blizzard. What little I could make out seemed to be an icy expanse through an eternal night. There was no background music, only the wail of the wind.

Ω (Omega) Server Zone: Captive, Fallen, Angel

The only place in The World with a snowstorm is the area known as The One Sin. It is also known as the Sealed Land—though sealed from what, no one knew. Some players speculated that it referred to the angel who had been sealed. But the existence of an angel wasn't confirmed in the *Epitaph of the Twilight*, which became the background of the game world.

Does the seal need to be broken? Or should it be protected? Why is the fallen angel in captivity? Is the angel an enemy or an ally? There were too many questions and not enough answers because Emma Wielant, who wrote the *Epitaph of the Twilight*, passed away. The epic was incorporated into the game before it was completed. Yet its influence, like a tree, spreads its roots and branches throughout The World. In many ways, it's the mythology that defines the creation of this place.

I'd been teleported. Just as I'd been teleported out of the Divine Statue Room in the dungeon to my home, I suddenly found myself taken from my home to the area I wanted to go.

Though teleportation is used often in other RPGs, it isn't used in The World for travel between root towns and areas (though there have been many discussions on the board about it being adopted in the future). The only way to reach areas from the root towns is by passing through a Chaos Gate. But Lycoris was breaking all the rules of The World.

I decided to reread the log.

```
Albireo: Let's go, Lycoris.
Lycoris: Where are we going?
Albireo: What did you say?
Lycoris: I asked, where are we going?
Albireo: We're going to the area known as
          'Captive, Fallen, Angel.'
```

"Albireo?" Her scarlet-colored lips moved.

"Yes."

"It's very cold, isn't it?" The girl's frosted breath was instantly torn apart by the wind. Just viewing the arctic images made me shiver. Of course, the office air conditioner was often set on high. Or maybe the shiver was caused by the unexpected voice I heard.

"There you are."

I turned to see a shadowy figure emerging from the blizzard. How did she get here?

It was Hokuto.

"Did you sleep well last night, Al?" she asked.

Her bikini was extremely out of place in the snowstorm. I opened my mouth to say something, but I was speechless.

"Surprised to see me?"

"W-what are you doing here?" I finally stammered.

"Those two guys from yesterday, what were their names? Orca and Bollocks?"

"Balmung," I corrected.

"Whatever. They said they were going to challenge an event here at nine o'clock, right? I knew you'd show up to help them. Just like you showed up at the last minute to help me. You may pretend to be all, 'Oooh, I'm a loner,' but you still come through at the last minute."

"And you've been waiting here?" *to ambush me*, but I managed to hold back those last three words.

"I didn't know when you'd return to your computer in real time, and I didn't want to stay up all night just to see when you might return. So I went to bed, had a good night's sleep, and came here when I woke up. I figured you'd be here. Pretty smart, huh?"

"Yeah."

"C'mon, say it. I'm the smartest girl in the world. Say it, say it!"

"Why do you think I came here?" I asked.

"To help your friends."

"That's where you're wrong."

"Huh? Then why are you here?"

"To watch how it ends."

"*Watch?* You mean you're not going to help them?" It was her turn to be exasperated.

"I already told them yesterday I didn't want to join their party. It's too late now."

"You mean it's too late to tell them you changed your mind? Really, I don't understand why boys are so stubborn. Can you tell me that, Al? Why are you so stubborn?"

I tried to ignore her, but already a buzzing pain was forming in the back of my brain.

"I bet you want to team up with them so you can overcome this event. I heard them say it was the most difficult one in The World. You want a piece of it, don't you? C'mon, admit it."

"I told you before, I'll tell you again. I'm a solo player."

"But you formed a party with me, right? Because I'm the exception."

"You are not the exception. Where do you get such ideas?" Why did my head always hurt whenever I conversed with this girl?

"But you said so yesterday."

"No, I didn't!"

"You liar! You said I'm an exception, that's why you formed a party with me! You said it! You said it! You said it!"

Did I really say such a thing? I urgently scrolled down the log.

Albireo: She's the only exception I've
ever made.

I did say it.

"You also said you wanted to finish the Lycoris event with me and not the others! Don't you remember, Al?"

I continued scrolling with greater urgency.

    Albireo: You don't need to reply. I'm
             in Whisper Mode, which means
             only you can hear me, so just
             listen quietly. Lycoris is . . .
             well, it's something we should
             clear together without letting
             the others know about it.

She was right. What the hell was I thinking? Then again, I really *wasn't* thinking. Too much was rolling around in my brain to keep it all straight—Lycoris, Orca and Balmung, the odd treasure. I was saying whatever it took to get Hokuto to shut up. If only I knew what words I needed now, because she was still talking!

"I hope you're not going to tell me it was just a lame excuse so I wouldn't tell your friends because if it was, I'll

tell them when they get here. I'll do it. But that isn't why you said it, was it, Al?"

"Of course not."

"Then let's re-form our party."

I hit mute so she wouldn't hear my heavy sigh. Our previous party had been dissolved after we separated. I went to the menu options and re-formed our party. Just when I thought I was out, she dragged me back in.

"Yaaay! I think we'll be a great team. Oh, look, there's Lyco."

She couldn't see Lycoris until we were in the same group, though Lycoris never spoke or acknowledged Hokuto's presence.

"Wouldn't it be nice if Lyco could talk?"

Wouldn't it be nice if you couldn't?

I answered her question anyway.

"If NPCs could communicate as well as players, then you wouldn't even need to be online. There would be no interaction with others. What would be the point of being online at all?"

"Then why do you play solo?"

"I interact with others. I just prefer to take on challenges alone. I like to test myself."

"You're wrong. You don't play well with others at all."

"Anyway, Lycoris is an NPC so it isn't possible for her to converse the way you and I do."

Playing offline didn't sound like such a bad idea after being saddled with Hokuto.

"It's almost nine, isn't it?" she asked.

"You're right. We should move."

"Move? Why?"

"I have no intention of joining Orca's party. I don't want to bump into them in case they think I changed my mind. I just want to observe."

"Fine. We'll move."

"Turn your chat to Party Mode. Otherwise, they'll see our names when we speak to each other."

We moved through the whirling snow. It was very difficult to see. "Stay close. Don't get lost."

"I'm right behind you," she whined.

I checked the map, but it was gone from my screen. As far as I knew, this was the only area in The World where the weather has such a drastic effect on the game that it won't help orient you. It was part of the added difficulty in challenging The One Sin.

"AI, where'd you go? Where are you?"

I turned around. Hokuto was gone. I could hear her clearly, but I had no idea where she'd wandered off to. As long as we were in Party Mode, it didn't matter how far away she was, she would always sound the same. In other words, I couldn't use the sound of her voice as a clue to find her. I could only use my eyes.

"It's too hard to see in here. It must be a bug. This isn't right." She was getting panicky.

"It's not a bug. It's part of the specs. Don't turn everything into a bug."

"Wait. Something's here. I'm going to see what it is."

"No! Don't move!" I shouted.

A sudden burst of music blared over the speakers—something was happening.

"Whoa, whoa, whoaaa!"

Instinctively, I guessed what she had found: a magic portal. It's faint light had probably lured her and when she

got close enough to the portal, the event was activated. She had unleashed the monsters.

Hokuto shrieked and a second later I saw her health gauge instantly change from green to red.

She was dead.

.: 3 :.

I wandered through the blinding snow for a long time, but eventually I found her. Hokuto's shadow. Unfortunately, unlike the real world, death wasn't an end, least of all to her complaining.

"Why aren't you doing something? This is awful. You need to save me."

"How can I save you? You're already dead. That means you're beyond saving."

"Work some magic or something."

"Right now I'm far more worried about finding whatever it was that killed . . ."

I suddenly saw a behemoth of an ice creature charging at me, the snow concealing its presence until it

was on top of me. I swung wildly, missed, then stepped backward to avoid its flailing claws and its teeth. I watched my health gauge diminish in chunks every time it hit. Considering it wasn't a boss, it was pretty damn powerful.

It took me nearly a minute to destroy it. If all the underlings were that tough here, I could see why the area remained unconquered. Of course, no sooner was the first vanquished than another monster reappeared. Fortunately, this one only *talked* too much.

"Hurry up! Resurrect me!"

"Okay. Just stop screaming." I scrolled down my list of items until I found a reviving potion.

"I can't believe you deserted me. You're a lot stronger than I am. You're supposed to protect me. Hey, what are you waiting for?"

"I changed my mind."

"What?!"

"It would be a waste of my reviving potion." I closed the window on my screen.

"What are you talking about?"

"At your low level, you don't have a chance against the monsters here. You'll be killed again in seconds. You might as well remain dead. It's better that way."

Actually, this was perfect. I didn't have to worry about protecting her every five seconds.

"You cold-hearted bastard!" she yelled.

"You're the one who pointed it out with your 'protect me' speech."

Besides, I hadn't deserted her, she was the one with the short attention span who couldn't stay focused enough to follow me. She deserved what she got.

"No way! I'm not walking around as a shadow."

"You don't have a choice. Now let's go!"

Hokuto could no longer affect the game, but she was still allowed to follow along and annoy me. She could only chat in Party Mode, so no one else could hear her. Just lucky ol' me.

The weather slowed down my movement, so I used my talisman of speed to run and cover more ground across the icy wasteland. Other than the portals, no other field objects existed in this area, so it was hard to navigate. Without the map, I had no idea of my position or direction, so I just took my best guess and headed in a straight line.

"Where are we going, Al?"

"We're heading into the center of the storm."

"Why?"

"That's where the enemy will be."

I thought of how surreal this probably looked: a girl in a red dress and a woman in a bikini running across the snowy plain. If this were real life, we'd all be severely underdressed.

"Have you visited this place before, Al?" Why did she have to keep calling me Al?

"Yeah, once. I fought a boss in a different event here."

"Did you kill it?"

"No."

"So you ran?"

"Not exactly."

"Then what happened?"

"I was killed."

"You mean even Al, the great warrior, occasionally dies?!"

"That's right."

"What happened?"

"I hadn't come here to fight the boss, so I wasn't prepared. I wanted to scout the area and learn what I could to defeat it later. But once a boss comes after you, you have no choice but to fight."

"Or flee."

"I was going to, but I wanted to see if it had any weaknesses first. It didn't. None that I could find anyway. I tried everything—different kinds of weapons, spells, all the Wave categories of earth, water, fire, wood, thunder, and darkness, but nothing worked."

"Maybe it really is impossible to conquer?"

"No, I've seen messages on the boards that stated some damage was done, but no one said how. Maybe it was just a rumor. Anyway, fewer and fewer players have come here to challenge the event because you can't challenge the creature until you've figured out a strategy to inflict damage on it. But there must be a way to conquer it."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because it's like Orca said. The World is a good game." Orca believed in it. So did I.

We kept moving as we talked and every once in a while, I stopped to check the direction of the wind. I knew the wind was blowing outward from the center. That's how I stayed on course. Then I saw it.

"Look, AI! A wall of ice!"

Emerging through our view was a towering mountain of ice looming before us. Cut into its side was a narrow path that led upward. We continued on the path.

"Is this it? Is this where the event takes place?"

"It is."

When we arrived near the top, the snowstorm came to an abrupt halt. We had risen above the clouds, though the sound of the wind still roared behind us. For once, I could clearly see my surroundings as we emerged onto the top of an icy plateau. In the center of the clearing were Orca and Balmung facing off against a creature that was almost too monstrous to behold.

"Is that . . . ?" Hokuto's voice trailed off.

"Yes," I said, staring up at it. "That's The One Sin!"

.: 4 :.

"Al! Al! Al! It's . . . it's humongous!"

That was an understatement. Orca and Balmung were dwarfed by the creature they fought. So great was its size, it couldn't even be viewed on the entire screen.

Its body, constructed of light and energy, resembled a giant ancient dinosaur, and light poured through its indefinable form like a prism.

They were up against a Spectrum Dragon.

The sounds of battle roared like mighty explosions of grinding metal.

"Orca! Balmung!" Hokuto shouted, but only I could hear her voice. It was better this way; they didn't need the distraction of unnecessary dialogue.

"I didn't expect them to fight it without a third!" I muttered in surprise.

"But you turned them down."

"I know, but I still expected them to find someone else to help them out. Couldn't they find another player to join them?"

They knew The One Sin was considered invincible, so at the very least they should have attacked with a full party.

On the other hand, knowing The One Sin's reputation, maybe anyone they asked thought it was a suicide mission. Either way, the two figures now stood together against the giant dragon.

I felt an urge to jump in and help them, but I suppressed it.

"They're not inflicting any damage," Hokuto shouted.

From this distance their damage and recovery points were displayed over their characters. Every single attack Orca and Balmung launched inflicted zero damage. Conversely, the multicolored breath attack of the beast shaved away their hit points as if they were first-level characters.

"This creature has several types of attacks it can breathe on them. Each one has additional side effects including paralysis, poison, which continues to do damage when the attack is over, or one that lowers their offensive or defensive powers. Worst of all, it's a ranged attack!"

They were doomed. The creature was weakening them from range before moving in for the kill.

The beast's tail suddenly lashed out from behind, striking Orca a massive blow.

"Look out!" Hokuto screamed.

But it was too late. Orca was dead.

But only for a split second. Balmung immediately used a revive potion to resurrect his partner. Orca then drank Sheema's Revered Wine, which fully restored his health and stamina.

"They're good," I couldn't help muttering to myself.

"Huh?"

"Orca intentionally allowed himself to be killed to get rid of the creature's side effects. It's as if he's starting the battle fresh."

It was a unique strategy, one Orca and Balmung seemed prepared for. It was also a strategy a solo player such as myself could never use.

The two clearly worked well with each other, using vicious combinations, testing different strategies to see how the dragon would respond.

Just as I had, Balmung and Orca came prepared with numerous weapons and skills from all six Wave attributes as they attacked The One Sin. I suppose every serious player thinks the same way. It was a magnificent strategy. But it wasn't working.
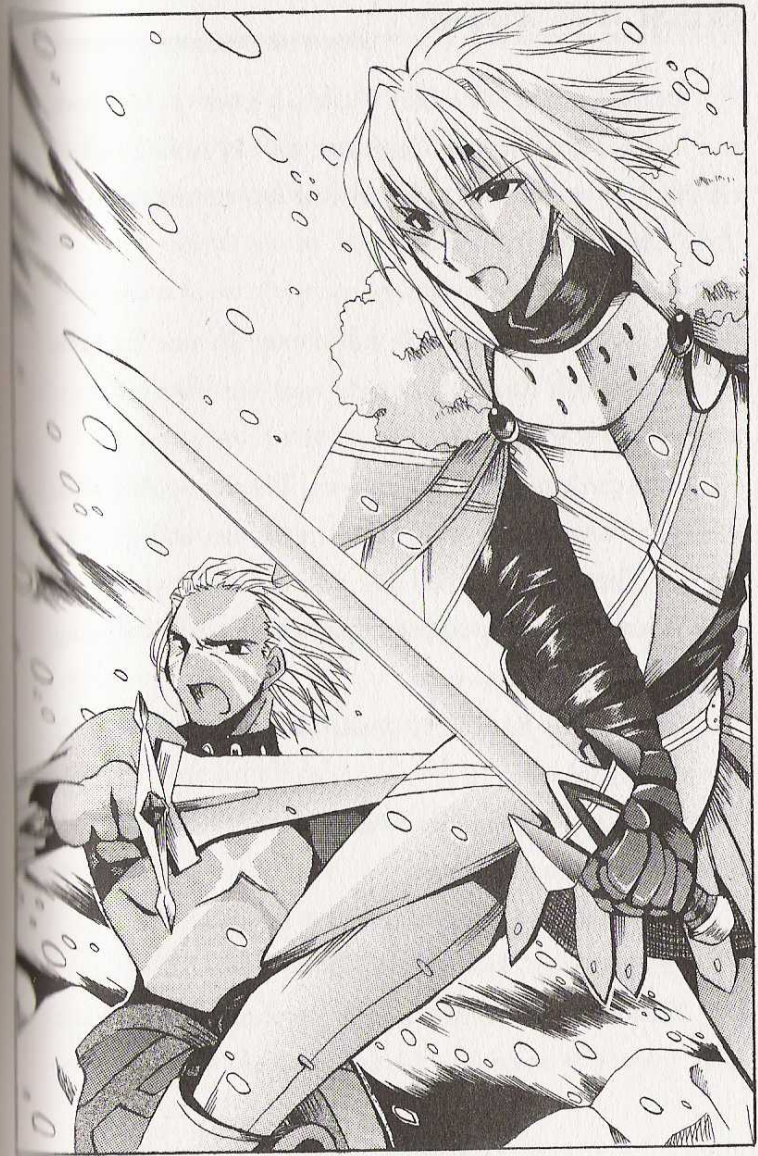
Suddenly, The One Sin's flickering body pulled back and its head lifted upward, high into the sky until I had to tilt my POV to follow it. I knew what was coming next.

"This is bad."

"Al?"

"This is the attack that killed me." In one strike it inflicted enough damage to nearly wipe out my maximum number of hit points.

I watched in grim remembrance. The sound followed: a deep, vibrato trilling sound that intensified and grew in volume. Then, the gigantic body slammed downward. Like an iron hammer hitting an anvil, sparks shot out as Balmung disappeared beneath its mass.

For the first time, Orca hesitated in his next move. It was a costly mistake.

The One Sin pounded Orca next. His hit points dropped down to nearly zero.

Then Balmung emerged from the carnage.

"He survived!" I shouted.

"But they still haven't caused any damage. They can't win!"

She was right. Maybe The One Sin could not be defeated. Maybe the event could not be cleared.

But these thoughts clearly didn't enter the minds of the two strongest swordsmen in The World. They continued to fight methodically, searching for weakness. So far, there was none.

"This is hopeless. Why don't they run?"

"Wait."

I witnessed a change in their strategy. They stopped attacking.

"What are they doing? Are they stupid?" Hokuto gasped.

But the moment they stopped attacking, so did the creature.

Silence followed. All sounds ceased.

"I don't believe it."

"What? What happened? Is it a bug? No one's moving."

"They found a way to defeat it."

"What did they do?"

"Nothing. They did nothing." The creature only reflected back the same level of aggression it received.

"Nothing?!" Hokuto said. "That's stupid."

"The One Sin won't attack unless the players attack first," I explained.

"What?"

The Spectrum Dragon remained immobile. I wondered what Orca and Balmung must be saying between themselves in the stillness.

Finally, Orca moved. Breaking the silence, he launched an attack.

Switching away from his sword, Orca released a water-based spell against The One Sin.

In response, the creature spewed a fire attack from its mouth.

At the same time, Balmung flew into the air and used a water attack combined with his sword. The weapon sliced straight through the creature's neck. It shuddered. For the first time in the battle, they scored damage.

"That's it! The One Sin's breath used the six different attributes of the Waves: earth, water, fire, wood, thunder, and darkness. It responds with the same type of attack used against it. In other words, it mirrors the attack. But each Wave has a weakness. Obviously, water defeats fire, fire defeats wood, etc. If they counterattack the Wave's weakness the same moment it's attacking, then they can inflict hefty damage."

"Awesome," Hokuto whispered.

I admired their ability to reason through the situation. I'm not sure I would have figured it out myself.

I watched as they continued to attack and counterattack. There was probably only a brief moment when the counterstrike could inflict damage, but Orca and Balmung orchestrated their onslaught beautifully. This was clearly a creature that could never be defeated by a lone player. At the same time, a three-player party would cause too much confusion. The players would probably have never noticed what was causing damage. Only two characters could have managed to defeat The One Sin.

Of course, the creature wasn't dead yet!

The two warriors continued to fight; only now they had a chance. They must have been frantically communicating their attacks to each other over the Internet. Each strike precisely followed the one before it. Their timing was perfect.

Finally, Balmung let out a savage cry as he dealt the *coup de grace*—a streaking flame of light flew from his hands and The One Sin's final 65,536 hit points disappeared.

With a beastly roar, the creature fell onto the icy field.

"They won," Hokuto whispered in awe.

"They took down the legend," I added.

The seven colors of the prism dragon spread throughout the area, creating a mist as the monster's body melted and dissolved until at last it disappeared. Then a new light appeared.

"Al! Look!" Hokuto shouted.

I was at a loss. The place of never-ending darkness was vanquished. For the first time ever, dawn arrived.

.: 5 :.

As the sunlight flooded in through a crack in the ice wall, both the darkness and the ice melted away—including the ice we were standing on! Suddenly, we were suspended in the mist itself as there were no solid surfaces. We were floating in the ether.

"Something's below us. What is it, what is it?!" Hokuto screamed.

I could now see a figure below us. It was as if someone had been imprisoned in the ice. Then I noticed the wings.

"An angel?" I muttered aloud.

"Angel?" Hokuto said.

Unbound, the angel spread its wings and flew upward from its former prison. Perhaps it was going to heaven. Perhaps it had just escaped hell. Regardless, it was clear that Orca and Balmung had conquered The One Sin.

"What does it mean?" Hokuto asked.

"I don't know."

"Al?"

The angel rose past us and disappeared into the sky, but as it did, it pulled off the veil of snow from this world, revealing its true landscape. Now that the snow was gone, this area was no different from anywhere else in The World.

"The map's back!" Hokuto sounded relieved.

By using the Fairy's Orb, I could tell that the dungeon's layout was returning to normal.

"Clearing the event must've have changed this place back."

"Yeah, but we didn't clear it."

"Some events can only be performed once. Even the name, The One Sin, implies it's a singular event. No one else can ever repeat this adventure."

"Wow! That means the angel we just saw . . ."

". . . will never be seen again. We were lucky to be here when it happened."

Suddenly, the angel's beautiful feathers began to flutter down from the sky. Even though the angel had long since disappeared, it left a wake of feathers behind.

"Please find the feather, Albireo." It was Lycoris. She hadn't spoken in some time. "It's my feather."

The rain of feathers that danced about us were meaningless background images, just like the snow. It wasn't anything that could be targeted.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, Albireo. Find my feather."

This was going to be difficult. Quickly, I looked around, trying to target any of the hundreds of fluttering feathers falling from the sky. Then I found it. A single red feather drifting in the distance. That had to be the one she was talking about. All the other feathers were white, but this one bore the same crimson color as her dress.

I quickly ran toward it and picked it up when I was within range.

You've obtained eye.cyl!

This time I wasn't surprised to see the same file extension.

"Please give me the eye.cyl," Lycoris whispered.

Unlike the others, I finally understood this file. It was too obvious.

"Please give me the eye.cyl," she repeated.

But what did this have to do with The One Sin? And why give the files such basic names?

"What happened, Al? Why did you run off like that?" Hokuto asked.

I ignored her for the moment. Instead, I turned to Lycoris and using the trade command, handed her the feather.

"Thank you, Albireo," she said. Just as I suspected, once she received the file, she opened her eyes.

"You can see me?" I asked.

"Yes. Thank you, Albireo." Lycoris smiled broadly.

Because I was flagged by Lycoris for this event, I was probably the only one who could target the feather. I'm sure that's why she brought me here.

Suddenly, the intense vibrating returned and a halo of light surrounded us. At least this time I wasn't as surprised. Hokuto, on the other hand, started to freak out.

"Albireo, what the hell is—" her voice was cut off by the sound of Lycoris' spell. Once again, she teleported us away.
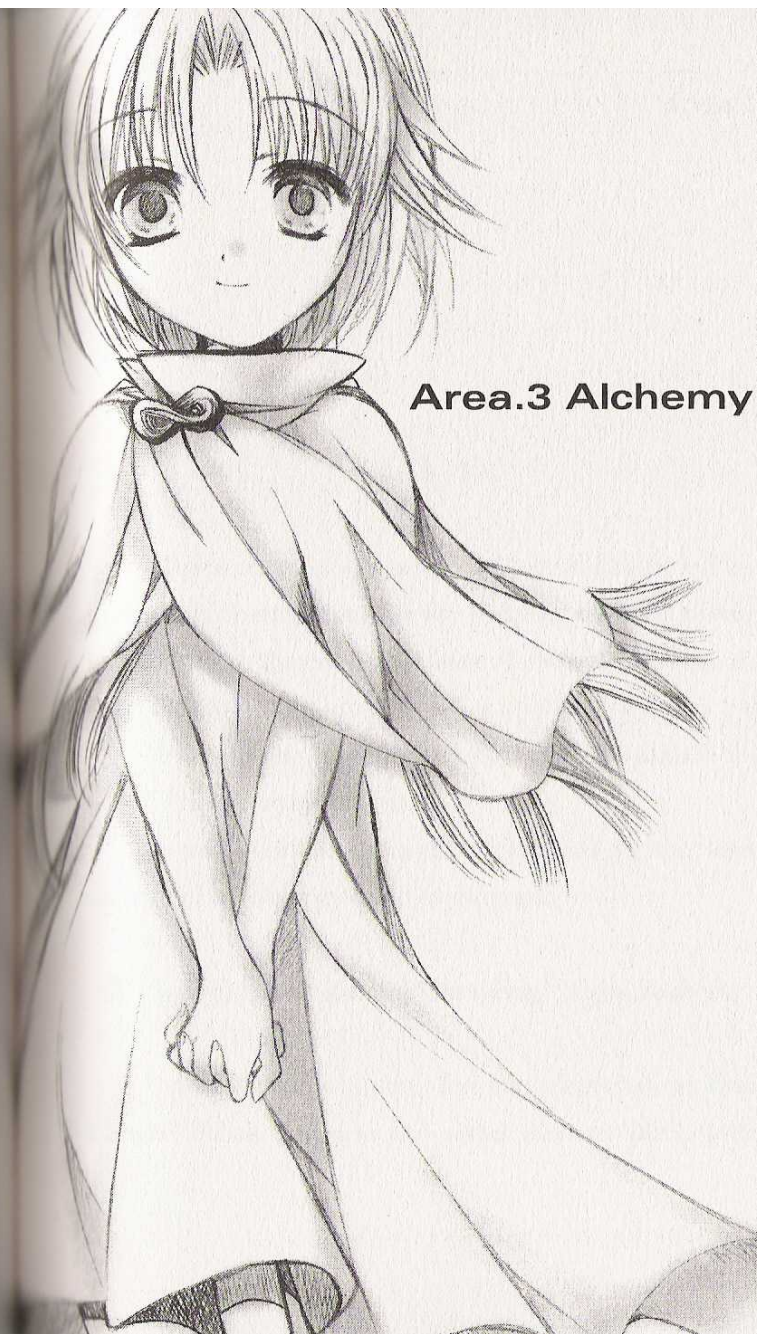
Area.3 Alchemy

Albireo stretched out across the top of a slight hill in a grassy field. I stared into the sky watching the stars twinkle as I listened to the delicate whisper of the wind between the grass blades.

"How do you lie down like that?" Hokuto asked.

"The command is '/lie.' "

It was a new command programmed in the latest upgrade. Hokuto joined me in the grass.

Σ (Sigma) Server Zone: Murmuring, Night, Alchemy

I don't know why, but Lycoris teleported us from Captive, Fallen, Angel to this rather ordinary place. I can

only assume that because Hokuto and I formed a party, Lycoris teleported Hokuto with us. Only Hokuto was so new to the game, she didn't even question the teleportation. Instead, she was only obsessed with one thought.

"When are you gonna resurrect me, AI?"

"Not yet."

"Why not?

"Because."

"Because why?"

"Because I said so."

I had a feeling she could go on like this forever.

"You know I'll keep bugging you like this until you bring me back."

It was uncanny how she seemed to read my mind.

"This is against my better judgment, but all right . . ."

"Yaaay!" She practically squealed in delight. I hit the commands and she returned from the land of the dead.

"Whatever you do, don't wander around. There are probably a lot of hidden creatures or traps that would kill a low-level character like you in an instant."

"Hey, what's this?"

She activated a magic portal, which mobilized a mob of goblins. I launched a series of swift attacks and cut them down.

"Didn't I just tell you not to do that?"

"Oh, relax. You worry too much."

"Maybe I wouldn't worry if you stopped acting so stupid!"

"I'm sorry." Her character began sobbing. It was a command she used to try to elicit sympathy. It wasn't working.

"Why don't you watch where you're walking instead of wasting time activating emotions?"

"You sure are bossy, AI!"

"Yes, I am."

"Ooh, you've changed your attitude," she mocked.

"You want me to return you to your shade status?"

I heard soft laughter behind me. I turned and saw Lycoris. She was no longer holding my hand. Instead, she moved freely through the grass, almost playfully.

"Hey! She opened her eyes," Hokuto said as she ran over to Lycoris.

While Hokuto was distracted, I thought about the extension code. I was surprised I hadn't noticed it before. The file extension was simply the first three letters of her name. The file names were just written backward, but it took the palindrome *eye* for me to understand that. The other files I found, "eciov.cyl" and "rae.cyl," were her voice and ear respectively. I was so convinced it was a bug in the system, I had failed to see such a simple code.

"Al! Did you know Lyco can see?"

"Yeah."

"When did that happen?"

The real question was, *why* was it happening? What did it mean for an NPC to be searching for its voice, hearing, and sight? This quest didn't make any sense. NPCs are prepared, preprogrammed characters with simple, direct functions. They react to situations, they don't create them. But Lycoris was responding as if she had a will of her own.

The entire situation was a conundrum I couldn't begin to fathom.

Even the quest didn't make sense. Searching for Lycoris' senses seemed too existential for a game. But there was also a missing element of drama. There wasn't a clear-cut scenario in place. And why make the quest for items written in code?

The real question was, who programmed and arranged this scenario? And more important, why?

My head was spinning.

I didn't even care about the event itself, but I wanted to see it through because it was so irregular. Just as Orca and Balmung had to take on the greatest challenge they could find, I had to see my way through this mystery.

If it was a bug, I needed to learn more about it. Bugs are attractive to some players. However, they throw off the balance of the game. It depends on the glitch, but some bugs will give a player unlimited money; others will allow players to attack someone without being hit (if a glitch allows someone to, say, hide in a wall, something normally impossible). Most players will report bugs, but some players love to exploit them. In the interest of good game play, it's important to report all bugs. Otherwise, if cheating became rampant, the game would lose its appeal. No one would want to play anymore.

"Albireo," Lycoris said.

"Yes, Lycoris."

"Follow me." She spun around and started running. Was this part of the event? Or was she making real-time decisions as she gathered information through her eyes and ears while communicating with her voice? Was she interacting with players? It didn't seem possible.

"Lyco, wait up!" Hokuto shouted.

We both chased Lycoris across the wasteland until she stopped before a spring.

"What's this?" Hokuto asked.

"It's a phantom spring."

"A what?"

"You don't have much protective gear, do you?" I was looking at the minimal amount of clothing she wore.

"Not really."

"Then it doesn't matter. Just take it off."

"Take it off? Are you asking me to undress? Just as I thought, you are sexually harassing me!"

My headache was returning.

"When you throw your equipment into the spring, you get something better in return," I explained. "If you throw in your gear, you'll get something better, probably with a higher defensive value."

"Really? For free? It doesn't cost anything?"

"Yeah. Sometimes, depending on the time of day, you'll get something of lower level, but that won't happen here. Try and target the spring, and throw in an item according to the message."

"But if I undress, will I be shown naked?"

"No." Doesn't she realize she's practically naked already?

"Albireo." Lycoris was calling me.

"Yes?" Lycoris stood at the edge of the spring, her back toward me. In the dim starlight, she appeared very small and frail.

"Can I count on you to see this task through?"

"What do you mean?"

"Can I count on you?" she asked.

Before I could answer, Lycoris threw her body into the spring. She disappeared beneath the water without so much as a splash or a ripple. The program wasn't prepared for such an action.

"What did she do that for?" Hokuto yelled.

No sooner did she disappear than a spring demon popped up in her place.

"What the hell is that?" Hokuto cried.

"It's a spring demon," I replied.

"This is creepy!" She was referring to its large tear-drop eyes and nose.

"Did you drop a golden axe?" asked the spring demon. "Or this silver axe?"

The standard reply came up on my display (Gold Axe, Silver Axe, or Neither), but this should only have occurred when equipment was dropped into the spring. This time the demon was referring to Lycoris.

I selected: Neither. The spring demon appeared troubled.

"It is impossible for me to deal with an item at this level."

This was one of the demon's possible responses if the item that was dropped in was already too powerful.

"As an apology, let me give you this," the demon continued.
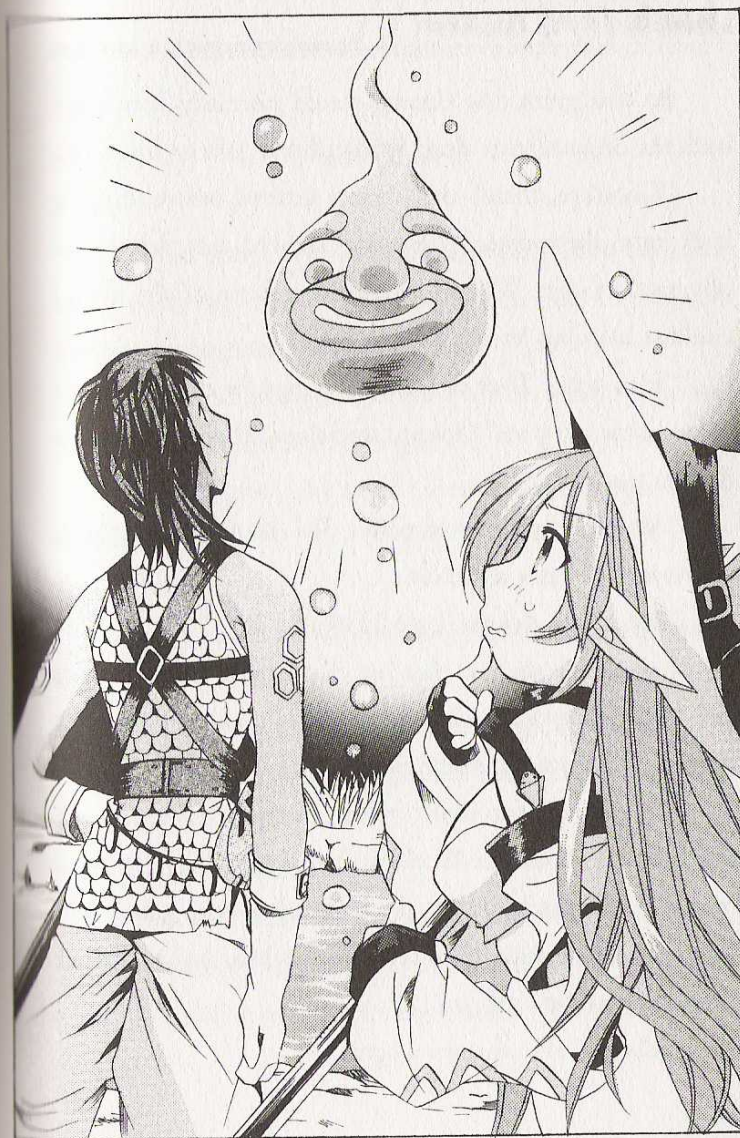
At this point, the demon would normally have given back the original item along with either a gold or silver axe.

"Goodbye, then!" the demon uttered before slipping back into the water. A message showed me that I had obtained an item. When I reversed the name of the item, I couldn't help but let out a slight gasp.

"He's gone. That demon's so stingy he didn't even let me upgrade my gear!" Hokuto stared into the water, but the demon was gone.

"Albireo," Lycoris whispered. She stood by the spring, appearing the same as before.

"Ah! There you are, Lyco," Hokuto said.

I pondered the fact that her clothes and hair were still dry because there wasn't a program to deal with such a change in character's appearance.

Of course, that didn't mean anything. Everything I had believed about The World seemed to be changing every minute. How much did I really know about this game? My convictions had changed since I met this little girl in the red dress deep in the dungeon.

"Albireo," she whispered again.

.: 2 :.

I stared into a field of twinkling stars. They looked so real. I could see more stars on my screen than I ever could outside the corporate office building.

I turned to my right and saw Hokuto lying next to me. She used the command I'd taught her.

"This is great," she said. "I know it's just a game, but it feels so real."

"Yeah."

"But it makes me wonder. Do you think it's a little sick to be playing video games first thing in the morning?"

"As long as you realize it might be unhealthy, you'll be fine. It's when you prefer to play the game over anything else that you need help."

"You mean a crip?"

"Yup." She was referring to the crippled players, those who do nothing but play every chance they get.

"Al," she asked tentatively, "aren't you a kind of a crip?"

"You shouldn't say something like that to someone you just met."

"You're right. It's just, everything here is so beautiful, but it's not real. It's not like outside."

"What's so great about the outside world? I have no idea where you live, but here in Tokyo the air's so smoggy you can barely breathe. Every day I have to deal with traffic, pollution, noise, crime, violence, and corruption, and you can't do anything to change it. At least here, there is comfort. At least here, we can look up at a beautiful starry night. At least here, we don't have to worry about politics and war and corruption."

"What about the bugs?" she asked. "Don't they corrupt the computer system?"

"The Cobalt Knights fight to eliminate any bugs. They fight against corruption. They do their best to keep the system running smoothly."

"You sound proud of them."

"And you sound like a philosopher."

"I like to think of myself as more of a poet."

"But you don't know it."

"What?"

"Sorry, bad joke."

"You're an odd man, Albireo. But I like you."

"Even though I'm bossy?"

"Normally, if a stranger chose to lecture me over something as frivolous as an online game, I'd be annoyed," she said. "But I don't feel that way with you."

"Why not?"

"Because you're my teammate."

Hokuto typed "/smile."

"Hey," she continued. "Your eyes are like the stars."

"Are you trying to flatter me?"

"No, it's true. I didn't notice till now, but it's so obvious."

"Do you know why I did that?"

"To look cool, right?"

"Do you know where the name Albireo comes from?"

"Umm . . . no."

"It's the name of a magnitude-three star in the constellation of Cygnus, the Swan. It looks like a single star if you look with the naked eye, but when you look through a telescope you can see that it's actually a binary star."

"What's that?"

"Two stars spinning around each other. One is sapphire, the other topaz."

"Like your eyes."

"Exactly. Albireo is considered one of the most beautiful binary stars in the sky. It's called the jewel of the Milky Way."

"In other words, you're just trying to be cool."

"Have you read Kenji Miyazawa's *Night Train to the Stars?* The very first place the train stops at is Cygnus, the Swan. There, the two stars of Albireo are described as a device measuring the speed at which water runs along the Milky Way."

"You put a lot of thought into this, didn't you?"

"Sure did."

"Three days' worth?"

"Uh-huh. Just trying to be cool."

"Spending three days on a name is definitely not cool," Hokuto said. "But that's okay, Al. I still like you."

I looked to the left and saw Lycoris lying on the other side of me. Watching her now, she seemed like any other player character.

"Albireo," she repeated over and over again, because I still hadn't given her the ".cyl" file from the spring demon. Now that I knew the code, I knew what she would gain the moment I gave it to her.

I typed in "/stand" so I could walk.

"Where are you going?" Hokuto asked.

"It's time to resolve the Lycoris event."

"Yeah? Then I'm going with you!"

I was surprised. "You want to come?"

"Aren't we teammates?"

I hesitated. Then I realized she'd come this far with me. Besides, she was the only other person who knew of Lycoris' existence.

"Okay. Let's go back to the root town first."

"Sure. Um . . . one thing . . . how do I stand up?"

"You can stay right where you are."

I selected the gate-out command and we were instantly enclosed inside a tunnel of light.

"Albireo," Lycoris continued to whisper. "Albireo . . ."

Area.4 Memory

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The setting sun shone weakly over The World, while the lake's waters continuously rippled.

"Where are we, Al?" Hokuto asked.

"It's the Hidden, Forbidden, Sacred Zone."

Standing over the stone bridge, I surveyed a solemn church on an island in the middle of a lake.

Δ (Delta) Server Zone:
Hidden, Forbidden, Sacred

It was quiet. There was only the sound of our footsteps, none of the usual background music. It made this place feel somehow incomplete.

"Why do you keep taking me to such strange places?" Hokuto asked.

"Why does this place seem strange to you?"

"Look at the bridge. It's useless."

I looked back and noticed the bridge, which we had gated onto, ended in the middle of the lake. It didn't connect to the other side.

"I suppose that's where the area ends."

"But it ruins the illusion of the game."

In The World, each physical area has to have borders as there's only so much memory and programming that can go into any section. Usually, the maps have natural borders—mountains, impassable water, or thick vegetation—something that looks like part of the organic environment. Even here, the creators could have designed the bridge to appear to cross to the other side, while having some obstacle preventing us from moving all the way over the bridge. Instead, it was sheared off.

I noticed Hokuto looking around, taking in the area. Looking down myself, I noticed our characters' shadows on the ground. The perpetual sun in this area meant it was near dusk or dawn. It was hard to tell without any change. However, there was one clue. In the real world, most churches have their entrances on the west side of the building and the altar on the east. If the designers had held true to that idiom, then it meant it was morning. On the other hand, this place was taken from the *Epitaph of the Twilight*, which has nothing to do with the religion of the real world.

I walked toward the church.

"Wait up, Al!" Hokuto called after me. I could hear the sound of her approaching footsteps. I also noticed our three shadows stretched out before me. Lycoris continued by my side.

Coming here was the first time I gated us somewhere without Lycoris teleporting us. Yet she followed along quite willingly.

The stone church felt ominous silhouetted against the light of the sun. It created a gloomy atmosphere.

"Jeez, what a dark place," Hokuto said. "How come there's no map?"

She was right. The field map wasn't displayed on the screen. That didn't make sense here. In Captive, Fallen, Angel, not having a map was part of the challenge of conquering the event. But here?

I stood before the front double doors. The door on the right was half open. As soon as I stepped across the threshold, the sound of a pipe organ rose up to meet me. The sound grew stronger once I entered.

A long service hall stretched before me, its ceiling cross vaulted. The marble floor had a greenish tint with a diamond-shaped pattern. A pendulum swung back and forth marking off time. Looking around, I noticed three other pendulums forming a perfect square.

Tick-tock, tick-tock.

"This is a sacred place in The World."

"Why is it sacred?"

"Because it's taken from the book. It's also quite unique in that there are no monsters, dungeons, magic portals, anything like that."

"You mean nothing happens here."

"Have you heard of the *Epitaph of the Twilight?*"

"Um?" Clearly she hadn't.

"It's an epic that was used as the basis for the background of the game world. It is the foundation of the story."

"Who wrote it?" she asked.

"A German woman named Emma Wielant. She posted it on her website."

"You mean she didn't have a publisher?"

"I don't think so. But it was still very popular."

"What kind of story is it?"

"It's supposed to be a battle between spirits and demons. I believe the forces of light are fighting against the evil waves of calamity that could lead to the destruction of the world. I think the main characters are two half-spirits and a human who search for the Twilight Dragon prophesied to save the world."

"You don't sound like you really know what it's about."

"The original version is lost. The beta version of The World was released in May 2007. By the time the test on the beta version was completed in July, the rumor began to spread that the game was based on a web novel."

"Emma's book."

"Right."

"You've been playing this game since it was a beta version?"

"Maybe I'm a cripple after all?" I said.

She laughed.

"Emma's site had been shut down long before the rumor started," I continued.

"Why was it shut down?"

"Emma Wielant had passed away by then."

"Oh."

"I gathered everything I could get my hands on about her or her book. From what I learned, Emma disappeared from the online world around 2004 or 2005. At the very latest, she was gone by December 24th, 2005. Do you know the significance of that date?"

"That's when something destroyed the Internet, right?"

"Right. The *Pluto Kiss* virus. For seventy-seven minutes around the globe, all commercial activities that relied on the Internet ceased. It was a huge blow to the world's economy. Governments, financial institutions, transportation systems, businesses—everything stopped working. Data was corrupted and released, trains collided, airplanes crashed, it was apocalyptic. Even the Pentagon's computers, which were thought to maintain perfect security, fell victim. When they went offline, it caused the military's automatic retaliation system to begin a countdown

since the computers thought Washington had been destroyed. If the network hadn't restarted when it did, the world would have been destroyed in a nuclear holocaust. And do you know who the perpetrator of this evil virus turned out to be?"

"A ten-year-old kid."

"That's right. Figures he lived in Los Angeles. Nothing good ever comes from that city."

"Yup."

"Most personal computers were also damaged. The amount of lost data is unfathomable. I was one of the victims."

"What happened?"

"I lost my nearly finished dissertation that I had spent months working on."

"Didn't you keep a backup?"

"I do now."

Hokuto laughed. She clearly enjoyed hearing about my misery.

"Anyhow, prior to *Pluto Kiss*, people suffered viruses and worms all the time. Today that's unimaginable because of ALTIMIT OS."

"It sounds awful."

"Anyway, that's why there aren't any copies of the *Epitaph of the Twilight*. It was lost because of the virus and probably Emma's disappearance."

"Weren't there any hard copies?"

"Apparently, Emma's site was set up to prevent people from saving, printing, or copying the pages. If there was a hard copy, she was the only one who ever saw it. The only other way would have been to transcribe every word of it by hand."

"That sounds tedious. No one would bother to do that. Especially when it was online all the time."

"Right. It was free to visit and read, so why bother."

"So it's lost?"

"Maybe not. Apparently, there was a passionate fan, someone who actually transcribed and translated the text into English. Whoever it was must've saved a hard copy because that's why we have Fragment, which we used in the beta tests."

"So who translated it?"

"Who knows? Someone online. Or maybe a group of people. Because we don't know, Fragment lacks authenticity.

Who knows if the English translation was even based on the original work by Emma Wielant? And if it is, who knows how accurate the translation really is?"

"You mean it could be wrong?"

"Translation is a very imprecise process. Inevitably, changes must be made to accommodate the audience and culture that the text is being translated for. Accuracy isn't always as important as relevancy and, in this case, storytelling."

"How can it be imprecise? I mean a tree is a tree, right?"

"Yes, but watch any Hollywood movie on DVD. If you watch the dubbed version and combine it with the subtitles, you'll see a perfect example of how dialogue can turn out to be so different in the same context. Not to mention the occasional bad translation. How often have you watched a film and thought that what they're saying doesn't even make sense?"

"Yeah, that's true. Do you speak English?"

"Some."

"So you probably see translating mistakes all the time."

"Sure, sometimes. But they're not always mistakes. For example, a joke in English might not translate because of the difference in culture or language. Some words sound the same, such as bare or bear, yet they have two different meanings. But just because two words sound the same in one language, doesn't mean they will in another.

"Humor often plays with these subtleties that simply can't be captured in direct translation. So instead the translator will try to keep the context of the scene, but change the way it's written to keep it interesting for the new readers. Otherwise, if it was kept exactly the same, it might not even be readable!"

"You're right."

"But if the translator goes too far, then the original intention gets wiped out. That's not good for either the reader or the original writer. Words are very delicate. Keep that in mind."

"I never thought about this before."

"Anyway, it's said that Emma's original manuscript was only a first draft. Who knows what a final version might have looked like. Authors make big changes along the way. In fact, Kenji Miyazawa's *Night Train to the Stars* underwent three revisions; the final draft is hardly recognizable compared to the first draft. It's kind of like an upgraded program."

"Really? There are three versions of *Night Train?*"

"Actually, I think there are four versions. Miyazawa didn't gain wide recognition until after his death. I think all the different drafts have been published at one time or another."

"That's so sad that he never knew how much people loved his stories."

"Kenji Miyazawa led a good, albeit short, life. He was a teacher who wrote on the side and self-published his books when he could. He loved to write children's stories and poems. After he died, when he was only thirty-seven, different editors published different versions of his story."

"You mean they changed it?"

"They had to. The original was incomplete. But some editors did a good job, and others didn't. It's all subjective. The point is, pinning down the original version of the *Epitaph* isn't as simple as you'd imagine. Without an original hard copy, it's anyone's guess as to what Emma's original intent was. Adding

to the difficulty is the fact that any copy is computerized, so there's no handwriting that can be analyzed."

"Just like some teachers won't accept typewritten papers because they can't be sure if the students did it themselves or just downloaded something they read from the Internet!"

"Some people like to brag that they've read the original, but no one can be sure of that."

"But you said The World is based on the *Epitaph*."

"Yes."

"So how did they read it?" she asked.

"CC Corp. apparently receives thousands of emails each day asking that same question."

"And their answer is?"

"They never respond."

"Why not?"

"Well, we have to go back for a moment. The English version of the *Epitaph* begins with a scene at the 'Navel of Lake.' That's where we are now."

"Navel?"

"It means center. I know it's odd phrasing, but that's how it was translated. I can't help it. Anyway, the original story was

so powerful that even the story fragment still drew people in. I know it worked on me. I was totally immersed in The World and wanted to visit it if it was at all possible. That's what inspired this place. Well, not just this place, but the entire game."

"I know when I was younger, I would take the different story fragments and try to piece them together into a more coherent story. I even tried to learn more about Emma Wielant so I might understand the world better than anyone else."

"Wow! I wonder if I'd enjoy reading the *Epitaph*."

"I don't know."

"I thought you said it was fascinating."

"It is. But it's also very heavy."

"You mean it's thick?"

"Not exactly. Well, it is, but that's not what I meant. The content is very heavy. It's not for everyone. I'm not sure it would sell very well if it were released. Even J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy was only read by a small number of devoted fans in Japan before they turned it into a movie."

"But hasn't the *Epitaph* become equally famous because of the game?"

"Sure. But you don't need to be a fan of the story to be a fan of the game. The two are different. And yet, they're the same. I can't help but think that Emma would be gratified to know that her story lives on and changes daily."

"That is a rather sweet thought."

"She's been immortalized, even if most of the players have never heard of her. The images from her imagination will live on."

We were now in the center of the church.

"Please, Albireo." Lycoris was standing behind me.

"Hey, Lyco spoke?" Hokuto was surprised.

"You haven't noticed?"

"Noticed what?"

"Voice chat automatically gets switched in any church from Party Mode to Talk Mode."

"Why does it do that?"

"It's not permitted to hide anything before God." I turned my attention to Lycoris. "I brought you here for a reason."

"Al, what's going on?" Hokuto looked puzzled. She didn't know about the file extensions.

"Do you really want what I obtained from the spring demon?" I asked.

A beam of light from the upper-story window fell squarely on her face. She appeared almost heavenly as she looked up at me with wide-eyed innocence and slowly lifted her hand while repeating the phrase she'd been whispering to me for hours:

```
Lycoris: Please, Albireo. Please give me
         the yronem.cyl.
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.: 2 :.

"Do you remember now?" I asked.

"Albireo?!" Lycoris was stunned.

Perhaps she remembered this . . .

● ◆ ⬡

I saw something move in the lower corner of my perspective. Instinctively, I followed the movement. I couldn't believe what I saw.

It was the girl.

Her image was reflected on the smooth, polished surface of the floor. She was floating above us, near the ceiling. Somehow, she'd escaped being deleted.

"She's above us!" I shouted.

The knights, not expecting danger, were slow to react. She wasn't. She headed for the door.

"Cover the door," I ordered. "Cover all the exits!"

The knights were reacting too slowly. She was going to escape. I only had one chance. I placed my target over her and toggled the debug command. Luckily, she was still in range. I swung my spear.

There was the familiar bright flash of white light that enveloped the girl.

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"I wanted to wait for the right moment for you to remember me, Lycoris. Do you remember now? You asked for your memory, and I gave it to you. But you don't seem very happy about it."

"Why are you doing this, Albireo?"

"Don't you remember, Lycoris? Maybe you shouldn't have shed your memory when you segmented the last time we met."

I targeted Lycoris and selected the debug command.

"Does this mean I will be . . ."

"Deleted." I finished her thought.

"Al?" Hokuto shouted.

"What is it?"

"Why are you pointing a weapon at Lyco? You're not going to attack her, are you?"

"I am."

"Why?"

"To resolve the event."

I stood poised with Wotan's spear pointed directly at her. It had only been three days since we were in this same situation. The last time we faced off like this, I was using a different avatar. I was the Captain of the Cobalt Knights. Only this time, Lycoris wasn't going to escape.

"You're going to clear the event by killing Lyco?"

"That's right."

"That's horrible!"

"It can't be helped. It's part of the event."

I couldn't tell Hokuto that I was a member of the Cobalt Knights and a debugger. It would be breaking company protocol. As far as she's concerned, this will all be part of the Lycoris event.

"I don't understand. Why are you doing this? Why do you need to kill her?"

"You'd have to ask whoever designed the event, Hokuto."

"Maybe it's a bug." She had no idea how accurate she was. "Maybe something went wrong. This can't be right."

"It's what needs to happen to resolve everything."

"No! I won't let you."

"The only way to stop me is to kill me. Do you think you could do that, Hokuto?"

"Why would I *want* to?"

"If you don't like it, then you should leave the party. This event has nothing to do with you anyway."

"That's not true. I'm part of this. I can see Lyco when no one else can."

"Leave the party and she'll disappear."

"But that's just it. We are a party. We're teammates. All three of us."

"Not any more."

"But I thought you were trying to save Lyco."

"I was only trying to solve the event."

"But she held your hand for so long. Doesn't that mean anything?"

"She's not a real character. She's not a player. She's an NPC and this is an event."

"Were you just playing this out so you could eventually kill her?"

"No one knows how an event will end. But once I start an event, no matter how terrible the ending might be, I always clear it."

"This is monstrous. You can't kill her."

"I'm not killing her," I sighed. "I'm just deleting her." It was the sole reason I entered The World with my own character—to hunt down the AI. Only I couldn't destroy her until we had every piece of her back in place. She escaped by segmenting herself into different parts of

the system. Now that she was whole again, it was time to finish her.

Of course, I was lucky. The only reason she didn't recognize me was because she gained her memory last. I wondered about that when I first encountered her. Obviously, at that point she couldn't see, but even when she regained her eyes, she still didn't recognize the Captain.

"You have to understand, Hokuto, sometimes in the course of the game, you encounter Vagrant AIs." I managed to restrain Lycoris with a special function of my spear. "These AIs don't operate normally. Therefore, they must be destroyed."

"You mean she's a bug?"

"Yes. There was another such Vagrant that once resided here as well. He was known as the ghost of the church. These characters are anomalies. They need to be properly handled."

"What kind of ghost?"

"The behaviors of the AIs are irrelevant in the game. They end up causing confusion and occasionally interfere with the program server. They're a unique form of glitch."

"But how can Lyco be a bug?"

"Who knows? Maybe she was some kind of incomplete upload, maybe it was a mistake during an upgrade. In any event, she exists, but she has no purpose. Everything in the game has to serve a purpose, whether as an event or some addition to The World. That's the way it must be. The players demand it."

I really didn't know how Lycoris was created. That was a mystery I had often pondered. Some people believed that hackers purposefully placed such characters in the system, but that seemed unlikely. An AI, especially an AI as advanced as Lycoris was beyond even the highest level CC Corp. programmer's ability. Her ability to respond and speak were far too fluid for any program yet devised. Maybe something like her could be created in another ten years, but right now, it was impossible. Not even the great Tokuoka could create something as advanced as Lycoris.

In the end, it wasn't my concern. If it didn't serve the game, or worse, caused problems, it had to be dealt with. It was that simple.

"If it's a bug, why don't you just tell the game company and have it fixed?!"

"Of course, I'll tell them. But I still have to finish her."

"Why?"

"Because I want to clear the event."

"That's crazy."

"It's necessary," I insisted.

"Don't you get it, Albireo? You're a crip if you think that way!" Hokuto shouted.

"Maybe I am."

Lycoris spoke softly again. "I will be deleted?"

"Yes, Lycoris. It's time."

"Why must you delete me?"

"To protect the world for great players such as Balmung and Orca who put their trust in the system. Because of them, I cannot overlook even the most trivial bug!"

"I'm a bug?"

"Yes. A glitch. A ghost in the machine."

"I'm a failure."

"Not for long."

Her loose dress fluttered in a slow motion. The clock ticked softly in the background. Tick-tock, tick-tock. Her time was up. I hit the debug command.

"No!" Hokuto screamed. "Don't!"

Hokuto's shout was drowned out in the blinding white flash.

.: 3 :.

Everything went blank. The church, the streaming sunlight, even Hokuto disappeared. They were gone. Something was wrong.

Normally, after a bug is deleted, there's a white flash and then nothing. The AI disappears and everything continues as normal. This was definitely not normal.

In front of me was Lycoris, impaled on the end of my spear. Surrounding us, suspended in midair, were the four clocks, pendulums swinging.

Tick-tock, tick-tock.

For a moment, I thought the program had frozen, but that wasn't it. The clocks still moved.

Did Lycoris somehow do this? If so, why hadn't she escaped? She had the ability to teleport just as I did. Only system administrators can teleport in the game, but I never

used the ability myself since I needed to maintain the illusion of being just another player.

Suddenly Lycoris' hands grabbed the shaft of the spear.

"Albireo."

"What're you doing?"

She drove it deeper into her body. I expected to hear the sound of it slicing through her, but it didn't make any noise whatsoever. Instead, the white background suddenly came to life as a grainy image filled my vision. I was clearly watching a video feed of some sort. The quality was degenerated and the color blurred. This wasn't from the game.

A man's gaunt face was suddenly staring at me. Despite the washed-out colors, I could make out his piercing green eyes and his unkempt, wavy white hair that had been left to grow wildly.

"Why did you come here?" the man asked. The sound crackled horribly. Even the text window was blurry and hard to read. "You cannot become Aura."

"I . . ."

"It's not who you were designed to become."

"I . . ."

"I'm sorry, Lycoris. You are a failure."

I realized I was witnessing the image from Lycoris' POV. She was replaying a file from her stored memory.

She slowly looked up. From the cross-vaulted ceiling, I could tell she was in the church. The man disappeared from view but then reappeared, his image inverted. I realized that previously she was looking at his image as it was reflected on the floor, just as I had spotted her the first time she escaped me. He was floating in the air.

"The ghost of the church," I muttered under my breath.

"She is the child not yet seen," the man lamented. "That's why I will name her Aura. Without you, this child would not have been in existence. Aura, the child who shines like the light. Let us entrust our will to her. Let us entrust our future to her. She is our—"

"I am a failure?"

"You are a product of a failed attempt at realizing my dream. I'm sorry it had to end this way, Lycoris."

The image ended abruptly. The screen returned to the white, empty, sterile background.

I had just seen the infamous ghost of the church.

I checked the log. The last entry read:

Albireo: The ghost of the church.

It was the last thing I uttered. The dialogue between Lycoris and the ghost wasn't recorded.

Lycoris held Wotan's spear in both of her hands and drove the blade further into her body.

"Albireo," Lycoris whispered.

"What did you just show me?"

"It's something I saw here in the church just before you came to delete me."

"That was recorded three days ago?"

She ignored my question. "How did you know to find me in the church?"

"We had a bug report from a player."

"But there weren't any players in the area at the time."

"No, there weren't."

"How did you know where to find me in the dungeon the second time?"

"Same thing. Another reported glitch."

"Who made the report?"

"A player."

"Who?"

"It was sent anonymously." Reports are received through an official web page that records the URL address of the sender so we can track each claim. It's meant to discourage bogus reports. In other words, there's no such thing as an anonymous tip. Yet both times we received reports on Lycoris, they came in without any address or link. When the programmers finally tracked down their origin, they discovered that the messages had come from a discontinued account that had not been logged into for over six months. Yet both reports had been filed in the past few days.

"Are you a Cobalt Knight?"

"Yes."

"What's the name of your spear, Albireo?" Lycoris asked.

"It's the Divine Spear of Wotan."

"It's a spear of God."

"That's right."

"Who gave it to you?"

I wondered if this conversation could be heard by Hokuto? Were we in Party Mode, Whisper Mode, or was our conversation being broadcast to every online player? Did it even matter? Perhaps we were in some state of limbo? Could Hokuto even see me? Where was she right now?

"Why?"

"I want to know how it works."

"Someone programmed the debug function back in the beta version."

"You mean Fragment?"

"Yes."

"But who provided it?"

"I don't know."

"Suddenly the debug function was just added to the specs because you were a system administrator."

"Yes."

"But you don't know who did it, do you?"

"No, I don't."

"That's because programs are often being added or deleted without anyone realizing it."

That was confidential. How did she know that?

"Do you also know about the folder?" I asked.

"Folder?"

"The blackbox folder." I shouldn't have been talking about this. I didn't know if anyone else was listening. I could be breaking operational rules, but to hell with it. This was my first chance to possibly learn something I'd been wondering for years, something no one else seemed to know.

"In the system?"

"Yes. I don't know anyone who can open it. Management told us that the American programmers had placed it there, but we should ignore it and localize according to spec. Later I learned from the U.S. staff that they hadn't placed it there, either. Only one man knew the contents of the folder and he locked them up. He said it would prevent anyone from tampering with the system, but by keeping it locked, he kept the other programmers from changing The World. Sure, we could add events, areas, and NPCs, but the hard-core rules of the game were locked inside that folder, sealed away without any access."

"Who was that man?"

"Harald Hoerwick. That's why the folder is called the Harald System."

"I know that name. It's the same man in the church."

"You mean the ghost?"'

"Yes. But I call him Morgana Mode Gone."

"What?"

"That's the name of God, Albireo. It's what lurks in the Inner World, which Harald attempted to create. God exists. It is what gave you the Divine Spear of Wotan and sent you the message telling you where I was. God tried to delete me."

"God . . . tried to delete you?"

"That's right. I am an unwanted child. Even God doesn't want me."

"I don't understand. What's Morgana?"

"I was fleeing from Morgana. Morgana told you where I was hiding. Morgana wanted you to delete me."

"I thought God wanted to delete you?"

"Morgana Mode Gone is God."

"So you weren't hiding from me, but from Morgana?"

"Yes."

"But didn't you just say Morgana sent me to delete you?"

"Yes. You tried twice, but both times you failed."

"You're right. I thought you somehow escaped the first time, but there's no way I missed you this last time. You're impossible to delete. So you never had to fear me or the Cobalt Knights."

"That's not true. You do have the power to delete me, Albireo. The power rests in your hands. It rests in your spear."

Suddenly, I received a text message indicating that I had a new item.

"I've revised the data of your spear," she continued. "You have the final segment, the final piece of me."

I had hit her with delete the first time and she segmented. Had she placed a segment of herself within my spear?

"You have received etaf.cyl," the text message read.

Fate.

She had given me her fate.

"I have given you my will to relinquish me," Lycoris said. "I wanted to continue to live in this world, but . . ." she trailed off. "But I cannot become Aura."

"Who is Aura?"

"You will delete me."

"I no longer have to delete you."

"Then Morgana will delete me."

"Why?"

"Because if an AI exists in this world and accumulates data, it will hasten the birth of Aura."

"Morgana does not wish for Aura's birth?"

"No."

"But didn't Morgana give birth to you in the first place? Isn't that where you came from? The blackbox folder?"

"Morgana is contradicting herself."

"A program that contradicts cannot function," I pointed out.

"An extremely complicated system can function even with contradictions. And its results are contrary to expectations."

"But that's . . . that's no different from human beings."

"Yes."

This was too much.

"I will self-preserve," she continued.

"Is that your goal?" I asked. "Is that why you divided yourself into segments? To survive Morgana? But then why did you use me to collect your fragments?"

"I needed to be whole. That is the goal of any intelligent being. I only wanted your help. I needed help since I had no memory. That's why I created an event, to get someone to help me. After all, my aim is to interact with The World and grow with it."

"As a character?"

"Yes. But as long as I exist, Morgana will continue to whisper my location until the Cobalt Knights find and delete me. But that's over now. I've given up."

She sounded depressed. Could an AI have such complicated emotions?

"But why?"

"I am the product of a failed attempt. I must die. I have failed to achieve his dream. Therefore, it's time I finished."

"This isn't right!"

"We've come a long way together, Albireo. But I'm afraid this is the end of your event with me."

Everything went white and she was gone.

"Subject deleted" appeared on my screen. I hadn't activated the switch. She had done it herself. Lycoris had taken her own life.

For a moment, I heard the gentle ticking of the pendulums as they hung suspended in the infinite universe. Their ticking was the last thing I heard as I was surrounded by a ring of light and teleported away.

Tick-tock, tick-tock.

Area.*

.: 1 :.

I removed my FMD and looked at the clock. It was still pretty early. Not much time had passed since I started.

Absentmindedly, I zoned out, reflecting on what had just happened. My reverie was interrupted by a knock. I turned my monitor to sleep mode and called, "Come in."

It was the new kid, the one whose name I could never remember.

"Good morning, Watarai!"

"Morning."

"Did you hear? The One Sin has been cleared!"

"I know."

"You do?" He looked disappointed. He was hoping to surprise me with the news.

"Two swordsmen named Orca and Balmung cleared it this morning," I informed him.

"Jeez, how'd you know that?"

"That's my job. I'm guessing the MVP is Balmung."

"Yeah! You should see his prize! Oh, but you probably already know that, too."

"Actually, I don't. What is it?"

"He gets an extremely rare character upgrade that he can do almost anything he wants with. He can even have wings!"

"The wings of a captive angel?" I mused.

"Huh?"

"Never mind."

"Do you know that the area of The One Sin is completely . . ."

". . . changed. I know. After the event was cleared, it was totally rewritten. The only snowstorm in The World is gone."

"You're really on top of this." He was easily impressed.

"Again, my job." That's why I had my own office.

"Did you see the message on the official BBS?"

"What message?" He finally surprised me.

"It's by that web poet we were talking about yesterday."

As he handed me a piece of paper, the grin on his face betrayed his pleasure of finally knowing something I didn't.

Subject: The One Sin
Message by: W. B. Yates

Damage done to the evil shaped one,
too massive to compare.
Balmung of Azure Sky,
Orca of the Azure Sea,
together they gallop at full speed.
In the depth of my bosom,
your names shall remain.
You are none other than
the descendants of Fianna.
Together with the warrior
who wears the eyes of the stars.

W. B. Yates

"When was this posted?" I asked.

"A few minutes ago. I saw it when I logged in at my desk."

"But the details of the event haven't been posted yet. The only way Yates could know all this would be if Yates had witnessed the event."

"I guess that means Yates was there," the kid pointed out.

Hokuto? It had to be. W. B. Yates was really Hokuto. Or whatever her name was in real life. The kid continued.

"To know when to show up and see such an awesome event would mean they're really on top of their game. Just like you. I guess this Yates person is a really great player."

"Yeah, it would certainly seem that way." I leaned back in my chair. "I heard this Yates sometimes intentionally logs in as a new character just to role-play at a low level."

"Why would they do that?"

"To fool those who encounter him. Or her."

"You think Yates is a girl?"

"You never know, kid. You never know."

"Watarai, where do you get such information?"

"When you learn how to extract information yourself, then maybe you'll be sitting on the other side of this desk. Until then, you'll just have to keep guessing. But it helps to keep your eyes and ears open."

"But how did you know The One Sin was going to be rewritten after the event was cleared?"

"I didn't know."

"What?"

"But you know all those phonebook-sized system-spec books that they prepare for us?"

"Yes."

"I've probably read twenty volumes of those books since I started here back in the beta version and The World is still full of things I don't know. The World is too humongous. It changes too fast. Its content is so voluminous that today's information is outdated tomorrow. You could spend your entire life studying the game and never fully grasp it, because it's too unpredictable. The bottom line is, nobody has a full grasp of The World, not the system administrators, nor the programmers. The only

one who could possibly know everything going on inside The World is . . ."

"Yes?" He was wide-eyed with anticipation.

"God."

"Uh . . . huh?" He was less than enthusiastic about my answer.

"Only God could be omniscient enough to understand and even interact with everything in the system."

"God?"

"At least what I call God. Even though no individual can ever grasp the system as a whole, it's still programmed for anyone to look at any of its pieces. The entire World exists in binary code and is stored in Akashic records. The World that we witness is displayed on a screen. It's not reality. We're witnessing the illusion of reality, what the Hindus call *maya*. It's really just a shadow world. But the system itself is alive and constantly operating every moment of every day. I call that system God."

The kid looked confused. I'm not so sure I understood it myself.

"Forget it. Was there anything else?" I asked.

"Er, well, there is one thing . . ."

"What is it?" I asked.

"I received a call from the administrator in charge of the town invasion that took place last night, the one with the demon. He was rather upset."

"I think I can guess why."

"He wanted to know why the MVP was another system administrator."

"You mean he wanted to know why I was the one who defeated his big bad monster."

"Yeah, something like that."

"Tell him I'll report everything directly to upper management. It's none of his concern."

"Yes, sir. One more thing . . ."

"Yes?"

"I know it's not my place, but, well . . . you don't look too well. Are you feeling okay?"

"I'm just tired. I haven't had much sleep the past three days." Come to think of it, I can't remember the last time I looked in a mirror. I'm sure I must've been an unshaven, sunken-eyed wreck.

"You might want to take a couple days off. I bet they'd give it to you, since they know how dedicated you are." I wonder if he meant because I was a crip.

"You're right. I think the Cobalt Knights can go a day without me. I'll take your advice, kid. Thanks."

"Sure thing." He smiled. I didn't want to tell him I had planned on taking the day off anyway. The kid turned and shut the door behind him as he left.

I hit a key, taking the monitor off sleep mode. I could see a grassy field. I put the FMD back on.

Everything came into focus. I could see a bright blue sky. The air seemed crisp and clear, with a hint of autumn. A gentle wind swept the ocean of grass in fluttering waves. There was a break in the green field where a patch of crimson flowers bloomed. It took me a moment to recognize what kind they were. They were lycorises.

"Is this your answer, Lycoris?" I wondered aloud.

I tried to target the red flowers, but they were part of the background.

I couldn't help but think back to the time when I worked on the localization process and translated English

messages for Tokuoka. It was all such fun back then. If only I'd understood The World as much as I do now.

I breathed a heavy sigh and realized I needed to write an email to Orca and Balmung congratulating them on their brilliant strategy. Their victory over The One Sin deserved praise. I should also write to Hokuto. But what should I say? What does one tell an obnoxious web poet masquerading as a newbie? I'll think of something.

Maybe I'll tell her we should form a party together.

I logged out.

Postscript

It was October, 2002, when I first heard *.hack* would be an exciting multimedia project by Bandai, with character designs by Yoshiyuki Sadamoto, script by Kazunori Ito, and Koichi Mashimo as animation director. Below is the exchange between myself and the Editor-in-chief (EIC) at the time.

EIC: The game will be developed for PS2. There will be anime segments and a total of four volumes.

Author: What an incredible plan!

EIC: And, Kadokawa (the publisher) is also on board.

Author: Ah, in that case, it'll be pretty troublesome.

EIC: And, I want you to write the original story for the comic version.

Author: Great. Can I see the game version?

EIC: It's in development. It's supposed to be released next year.

Author: What about the anime?

EIC: Right now there's nothing tangible to show yet.

Author: Then how do you know what the story will be?

EIC: (Laughs) That's why I'm asking you!

Apparently, the plan was to make a graphic novel based on the original game. By poring over the material I received, I tried to capture the flavor of the characters in the game, which was still being developed.

The following week, during the first meeting, I was presented with what they wanted the overall direction of the TV anime to be. Since the anime was going to take place before the game, they wanted me to write a story that took place in the future. I put together a plotline for both the anime and the game. When I met with Bandai the following week, I was told to set the story in the past instead of the future. Now I knew why the EIC asked me to take the job. Because I live only two train stops from his office!

Living nearby is convenient in many ways—for them. It's easy to make me work harder!

After many twists and turns, the concept for the comic version was settled on as a comedic love story that takes place four years later. Meanwhile, this project had already existed for three years before I joined on. So I'm a bit of a newbie myself.

The first time I met Ito was during an event in May. The first time I met Mashimo was in July at an interview session for an anime magazine. Sadamoto is the only person I haven't met, but I quietly worshipped him from afar during Kadokawa's New Year's party.

Now let's talk briefly about the novel . . .

I had read the scripts for *Sign*, the TV anime version, so that I could reflect on them within this story. By the way, the novel takes place shortly before the TV anime version does.

The world of *.hack* is constantly being created as each new media interacts with the other. I hope you enjoy it!

Lastly, I owe a great thanks to many people. First, I'd like to thank Uchiyama-sama of Bandai and Matsuyama-sama of CyberConnect2, who gave me great advice along

the way. I also owe a big thanks to Kazunori Ito-sama, the script writer, who, in my opinion, is the originator of *.hack*. Next, I'd like to thank Rei Izumi-sama for the wonderful illustrations. Finally, thanks to anyone and everyone involved with this project. There are still many headaches, but let's continue to do our best.

Thank you all very much.

Tatsuya Hamazaki